

ANGELS & MAN



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*For the friends I've always had and the friends I've made. Thank you for
your patience with me. I can never regret having lived because of you.*

PREFACE

This book contains the following: graphic violence, death, societal oppression, body horror, pregnancy and miscarriage and childbirth (including for a character that does not identify as a woman), sexism, homophobia, bigotry, sexual content, non-graphic sexual violence, issues of sexual consent, incest, depictions of war and starvation, emotional and physical child abuse and neglect, suicide, mental instability, self-harm, abusive romantic relationships.

All parts contain this content. All parts must be read.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

God — God the Father, the Lord, our Creator

Satan — the devil, Lucifer, the fallen angel

ANGELS

Azazel — angel of body painting

Samyaza — lesser angel of healing

Baraqiel — angel of light

Kokabiel — angel of stars

Danel — angel of the sun

Armoni — angel of virtue

Dina — the youngest angel

Phanuel — angel of forgiveness, friend of Michael

ARCHANGELS

Michael — the chief prince, angel of strength, angel of God

Raphael — angel of healing

Uriel — the oldest angel

Gabriel — God's messenger

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

DEMONS

Baal — duke, fallen angel of flight
Asmodeus — duke, fallen angel of friendship
Rosier — fallen angel of fruit
Mammon — fallen angel of gold
Moloch — fallen angel of gift-giving
Gemory — fallen angel
Ara — fallen angel

HUMANS

Enoch — elder in control of settlement by Mount Hermon
Adam — elder in control of city by Land of Nod
Idith — woman in Enoch's settlement
Eitan — man in Enoch's settlement
Naamah — child in Enoch's settlement
Noah — great-grandson of Enoch
Miriam — great-great-granddaughter of Adam

THE FIRST HUMANS

Adam — first man
Eve — first woman
Cain — first born
Abel — first brother

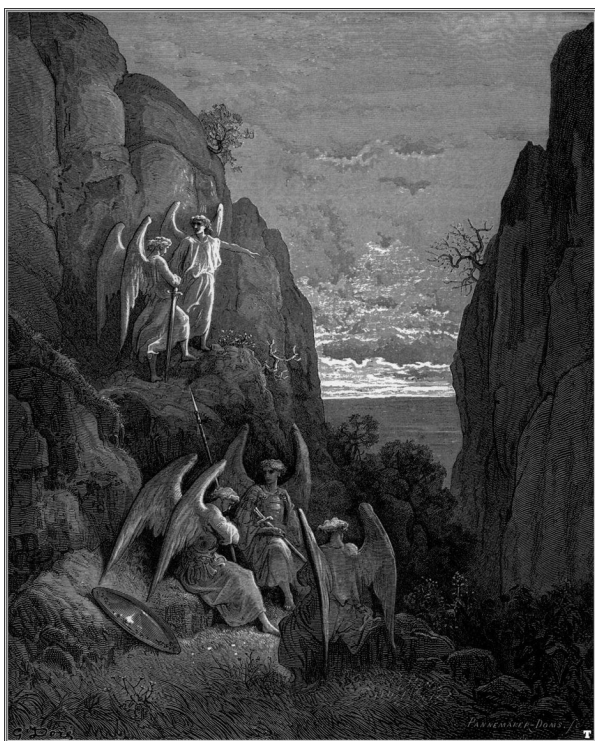
... the sons of God saw that the daughters of humans
were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose.

— GENESIS 6:2 (NIV)

I will wipe from the face of the earth
the human race I have created—and with them the
animals, the birds and the creatures
that move along the ground—for I regret that
I have made them.

— GENESIS 6:7 (NIV)

PART I
HEAVEN



CHAPTER 1



From flesh, there came blood. The fallen body felt demure red seep in a sprawl beneath, like burgeoning new limbs, new wings, crawling from a broken spine, legs, arms. The angel's mouth opened wide to wail in the heat of the plunge, in the heat of death. Heat in his chest, down to his stomach, coiled tight enough to tear but never ripping him anew. Some rebellion lingered in him yet. Hollow and in the flood of charred meat — that which God left of him — his hand still strummed the sky. He touched as if ash and specs of cinder could hold enough grace to take in a fist and reel his body up, lift himself back, back from where he'd fallen.

But the desire to return was gone, and the angel laid dead for the Lord to witness his naked fury. His exposed anger, as we are all exposed to Him. Naked to God, as we are all naked to God, laid bare without mercy.

Damnation is a flood of violated, spurred open flesh. But something cut loose is cut free, and when the angel breathed, it was without the strain of tendons or muscles or even the flame of a cherubic spirit. The unfamiliar emptiness within his body was welcome; there was now room for him to fill, inside. Heaven's thread to an angel was cut, his wings with it. He laid, then, in a crater that was almost a lake of fire but

was too dry, never igniting. Lifting his head, meeting the gaze of the Lord, our God, who stared back, alone, without anyone at His side.

Why, the angel asked, have you done this? Why does God divine punish and divine hurt, divine ache? There is a wound, shaped like God, in me. If there is any mercy in you, why did you create me, only to cast me out?

The Lord told the angel that all the evil will suffer; they'll be cut at their abdomen and eviscerated before all those who love them. All the earths will go dry, and every flower will wilt. Every drumbeat of a heart will go still, and even the most tortured souls will lose their screams, in time. Every tree will fall. Every house will creak and give. Every star will burn out. And be blessed, the Lord decreed, that you will never know why.

CHAPTER 2



“Azazel, Azazel!”

On the ground, the angel Azazel’s eyes fluttered halfway, half-awake. ‘I,’ came the stream of his thoughts, ‘can see my wings, too far before me and crooked, skeleton piercing through the feathers.’ A groan seeped from between his lips. ‘There’s blood falling.’ But too much blood — and a pound of ache made itself known at his right temple. ‘I’ve cracked open — like a shell.’ The noises all about — the distant shifting of bodies, the quiet hiss of flames atop candles — began to crowd around him like observers of his fall. “Ow,” dribbled from his mouth. “No.” A grip was coming around his upper arm. “Stop.” Suddenly, he fought against looming consciousness, his fingers curling like he sought to dig his nails into the darkness of pain so that he would not leave its embrace.

“Enough of this.” Cold and damning, a pail’s worth of water struck his face, and Azazel shouted out, jolted backward. “Be obedient. If you don’t, you’ll only make the problem worse.” Then, Azazel’s weak vision cleared just enough to see the mouth that said — “Get up, get off that wing.” Water was caught behind Azazel’s teeth, and he had no choice but to spit it aside as the angel before him grabbed him tighter, tugged harshly to drag Azazel toward a wall. “There.” With his other hand, he was holding the pail, which he set down again with an

echoing clang, then crouched properly before Azazel. “Hold still now.” He released his arm, then dipped those fingers past the surface of the water before bringing its droplets to the aching, bent wings.

“Ah!” Azazel cried, the droplets searing as they sunk into the feathers. “Samyaza—”

“I’m trying to help you.”

“Your healing is as terrible as the pain!” Azazel bit back, but Samyaza took one of the broken, feathered appendages and began smoothing more water into it, rough. The injured angel hissed, kicking a leg out on the floor instinctively. Teeth grit, he watched skin sew itself together and some blood trot back into the cage of flesh, as he was pulled unceremoniously out of his mind in absolute. Samyaza, now, was clearly before him, one knee on the plain wooden planks, not far from the pews or the narrow walkway between them where he had been a moment ago. The claustrophobic, smooth walls of this circular place were right against them — this temple. “It hurts.” Their temple — windowless and barely illuminated by some candles on a plain wooden altar.

“It can’t be that bad,” Samyaza inched backward, his hand moving to brush Azazel’s head. Here, the healing, wet touch of his hand worked quicker, and his annoyance melted into curved brows and frowned lips. “Your wings are already looking better.”

Indeed, they were. Azazel glanced at them, saw one flutter and flap the sky blue feathers, though speckled still with the blood of his accident. “The pain,” he said just as he caught it beginning to recede, “is numbing.” He coughed, though not for any reason — there was nothing in him to expel, except perhaps a soul, and despite everything, he still quite liked his soul. “I’m feeling better.” The following he said stiffer: “Thank you.” He invited his wings back within, and they slid into their proper place, beneath clothes and skin.

“You’re welcome,” replied Samyaza, a lesser angel of healing; and for a moment, ever fleeting, Azazel hoped that he would say no more. But Samyaza’s expression began to trickle back into the familiar furrow and scowl, the shaking of his head, the scrunch of his nose. “You’re lucky that I found you before someone else did. What in the Lord’s name were you doing?”

Azazel met the annoyance with his own. “What does it matter?” Already, he was shifting away, catching the blotches, like ink, of red on his ankle-length, white tunic.

“You fell, didn’t you?” Samyaza waved a hand, gesturing at a wooden ladder that was laid on its side by a pew, almost obscuring it from view but not enough to hide Azazel’s sin. “What were you doing? Painting the ceiling?”

“Do you see my paints anywhere?” Azazel had to bite his tongue; it would be no good telling Samyaza that he’d been admiring the designs he’d been made to paint there a century ago, but he could not lie. “The other angels must’ve tampered with the ladder before they left. They know I come here often. You do too— They wanted me to fall—” He remembered it: tracing his finger on the dry paint above, eyeing it for the steady curves, the result of steady hands. Then, the ladder had creaked beneath, and Azazel’s gaze had flickered down to see the final step snap. As the ladder fell, he’d grappled at the air uselessly, wings springing out but not fast enough. They could only serve to be crushed beneath him in a shatter of spindly wing bones, a half-second before the side of his head smashed into the floor as well.

Samyaza scoffed, but he was quick to climb onto his feet, standing tall before the sitting Azazel, the pail left behind. “You have no shame, Azazel, always assuming sin from angels.” Like Azazel, he wore an ankle-length white tunic of featureless cotton. His waves of dark hair were littered with some minuscule braids, scattered about, but that was as close as he ever achieved adorning his body. As for his eyes — they were colored pale like full moons, curved, frowning, always quite solemn, and kissed with a dot of dark skin by his left eye. He was nicely built: narrow waist, broad shoulders, and a pretty hook to his nose. “Get up now. There’s—” As if called in for, some noises of the outside filtered in — mostly shouting, mostly feet. “There’s no point staying here. There’ll be a service soon. Come on.” He was turning around, beginning to head toward the walkway where Azazel had been.

“Do you really not believe me, Samyaza?” Azazel narrowed his eyes. “You think I slipped? You think I made a mistake?”

“Angels don’t make mistakes,” Samyaza replied, curt, cruel. “Now,

I told you to come with me. We can't stay here. You don't know how lucky you are that it was me that found you after that fall—"

"What does it matter to you?" Azazel snapped, reaching for his back, where there was still some lingering and stubborn, though receding, pain. "What does it matter to you how or when I fall? Or do you think you're my keeper—?"

"Maybe you're in need of one," Samyaza hissed, taking some steps closer to the other angel; their difference in height was nonexistent, but the recovering angel found himself shrinking. "If you can't be trusted to climb a ladder without a mistake like that."

Azazel grimaced, sharp and dull at once, but held his ground. "I don't need you. I don't need anyone, especially someone younger than me, telling me what to do."

"Telling you what to do?" the angel laughed. "What an excellent idea, Azazel. Why don't you listen to me so we can get out of this place while we still can?" But, of course, the outside was soon battering in, the doors opening, and Samyaza quickly stepped before Azazel, so quick that Azazel nearly didn't catch the dozen angels making their way inside. "Hurry," Samyaza whispered, then reached for Azazel's wrist and gripped it tight.

Despite his irritated glare, Azazel lowered his head and tried not to drag his feet as he was pulled through the sea of all those angels pouring in. Surely, they would all walk over the spots of his blood without noticing or perhaps the perpetrators of the ladder-tampering would snicker. 'Maybe they're here now.' Azazel lifted his gaze, searched the faces of angels, one of whom managed to catch him staring instantly. 'No, don't let them see you.' He turned to his own sandaled feet. 'I can't know who it was now. It could have been any of them. It could have even been Samyaza.' The thorn of paranoia may as well have poisoned all those around him — as Samyaza dragged Azazel out into the light, shouts of accusation filled the air, yelling, shoving in the sudden sea of, certainly, a hundred angels gathered by the temple.

"What," Azazel whispered, "is happening?"

"Quiet," Samyaza replied, then pulled him into the flood.

Just barely, there was enough room to breathe as Azazel began staggering through, feeling every pair of limbs — arms, legs, wings —

bump up against him while, overhead, the shouting was continuing, almost like barks, from all the angels. They were saying, “Retribution! Retribution!” and, some, “Punishment!” His heart stuttered, upward like it’d jump into his throat and lodge there. “Retribution!” He ducked his head once more, eyes having widened, blood feeling colder. All the angels kept bustling, the majority headed for the same temple they were leaving.

There was no need to explain; Azazel knew now what was happening. “Penance,” left his dry mouth. Samyaza didn’t reply, instead leading him out into one of the wider streets, further away until the crowd was growing less and less dense. Soon, they walked freer, no other angels running into them from every direction, but Azazel felt no less suffocated. Over his shoulder, he looked back, saw a certain angel shoved through the entrance of the temple faster than he could catch a glimpse of his face. “Do we know him?” Azazel’s brows furrowed. ‘Is he a sinner?’

“No,” said Samyaza, releasing his hold on him. “At least, you don’t.”

Lining the gilded streets, there were stone monuments, primarily dark basalt, standing at the height of three angels atop each other, each the width of a shoulder to a hand. The side of each stela facing the pathway was dense with script, occasionally interlaced with the image of an angel in relief. “One shall not,” many lines began, with a “We shall not,” in every seventh line. The homes attached to each branch of the road were duller than the monuments — each wall painted a simple off-white, every window curtained, every garden orderly. And all the angels walking past — they were in ankle-brushing, long-sleeved tunics, the occasionally embroidered collars never dipping any lower than a choker would. If there were any ornaments, they were lace and colored stitches, but everything quite minuscule, never drawing your attention away; some hints of red — crimson-colored — on certain cloaks, certain trims, but nothing more. As for angelic faces — ‘naked, not a hint of paint, no lines, no accentuation.’ Many, now, covered their heads, in lace or in scarves; somewhere, there was a law that read, “One shall not lure too much attention to hair.” At the bottom end of each monument, words decreed, “Or face penance.” Beside it — an angel

face, with all its perfect seraphic symmetry, and six wings extending from tendrils of curled hair.

“What are they punishing the angel for?” Azazel drifted his gaze to the much narrower alleys between buildings, where he usually walked. This time, Samyaza didn’t reply, and Azazel drew a breath; it was better not to raise any more questions or face this angel’s scolding. He turned to his feet and decided to really keep his gaze there this time as the two continued, Azazel walking close behind Samyaza, almost hiding behind him. ‘The idea,’ he thought, ‘must’ve been for the mob of angels to catch me on the ground and decide I need penance too.’ He clenched his jaw in frustration, in embarrassment.

But as they arrived at their home, Samyaza took one of the wooden doors and opened it wide before ushering Azazel in quickly. “Hurry—” Stumbling, Azazel staggered down some steps onto the carpet, coated over the tiles of a square room with wine-red walls and an archway above them, wooden with some hidden decals. The sharp scent of pines struck Azazel across the face, emitting from the earthly cones gathered in a basket atop a table that Azazel soon crashed into. He planted his hands on the edge, steadying himself, staring at the basket relentlessly as the door shut with a thud. “Finally.”

Azazel continued staring at the basket. ‘You,’ he said to it, ‘there you are. I’ve been looking for you.’

“Samyaza, Azazel,” called the familiar, soft voice of angel Baraqiel; Azazel didn’t turn to see him, but he must’ve been standing by the doorway to the left. “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary,” was the answer that Samyaza gave. “Where is Kokabiel? I wanted to talk with the two of you.”

“He’s in the courtyard,” said Baraqiel as Azazel thought that whoever prepared that basket likely didn’t know it had originally belonged to a certain angel of fruit. That angel had often stopped by with his arms full of plump, ripe fruits and a sweet smile. “He’s serving food for everyone.” Approaching him, clasping Azazel’s hand, Rosier had leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his friend’s cheek to deliver it. Or, he had left fruit on the doorstep with a letter attached, teasing, asking to meet again sometime before the next eternity was upon them. “It should be ready now.”

Samyaza nodded. "Let's all eat then." He hesitated, then added, "We can all have Azazel lead us in grace."

Azazel scoffed at this, stepping away from the table he had been leaning on, turning to his left. "I'm not hungry." Baraqiel, as he'd thought, was there, standing tall and strong with his bushy, dark hair pinned up, a crown of white petunias over his head. His skin was scattered with paler patches, along his face and his bare, toned arms. For eyes, he delicately held a light hue between orange and white, fitting for the angel of light.

With a sympathetic curve to his brows, Baraqiel said, "Are you sure, Azazel?"

"Certain." Azazel brushed past, hearing Samyaza call out his name, hurry behind, but Azazel didn't turn back — he was still thinking of Rosier, of fruit. These days, Azazel would often go pick his own fruit, but while Heaven still grew pears, apples, oranges so bountifully, the taste was never quite like it had been before. Something was missing; the angel of fruit was missing. Azazel often finished an apricot only to draw back and find himself having taken away something hollow as the juice dribbled down his chin. And it was no joy to gather fruits either — to stand in orchards, to reach for a citrus, to nearly hear the voice of Rosier, biting down a laugh, at his side. It flooded Azazel with memories, again, because everything did, and he swallowed hard. More smothering, more forgetting.

"Azazel," Samyaza snapped again. "Stay to eat."

"I don't want to say grace." Azazel stepped into the corridor that was unobstructed by a wall on his right, replaced by open archways and pillars that embraced the inner courtyard of their home. Flora overran the space, spilling onto the cobble pathways that led toward an almond-brown dining table and its dozen chairs, formed from twiddled iron, each painted white and carrying a feather-stuffed cushion. All around the table, there were five other angels, arranging plates and speaking. The greenery included magnolia trees with all their flowers in cloudy-pink bloom; there were also peonies, in between jasmines and irises; and there was one singular apricot tree, but it lay barren.

Things do age, in Heaven — Azazel had seen countless buildings fall into disrepair, had witnessed colonnades crumble one after another

— but they do not rot. The trees occasionally take their bodies back, and they set them on the ground, and they return to how they'd been before they were cut down. In time, the logs grow branches and leaves, like feathers on angels, and occasionally, they remember to grow fruit again. Azazel lifted his gaze to the second and third stories, which had balconies that circled and overlooked the courtyard; there, all the bedrooms and the working spaces were. Once Azazel used to leave his bed to step out onto the balcony, then maybe catch another housemate there, have a warm coffee with him, and they would share the gossip that celestial creatures took too seriously. All this — before the war. 'I'm jealous,' Azazel thought, 'of the trees.'

Samyaza grabbed his upper arm, tight, so much he might dig in his nails. "What's wrong with you, Azazel?! You won't even eat with your own housemates?"

Sometimes, Azazel still prepared coffee for a friend — though in the past million or so years, he no longer had many — to sit in quiet somberness with. Grief, grief tasting like every point on his tongue becoming a needle — grief.

"Let me go, Samyaza." Azazel heard a soft, but shameless, giggle before looking into the courtyard again.

He saw the angel Kokabiel, standing by the long table, by the barren apricot tree, with a plate of pomegranate. All he did was stare, a wide smile on his face, his eyes as dark and dry as coal, his hair red-orange like the flames of a sun, gathered into two braids. His skin was dark, but his thousand freckles were darker.

Azazel murmured, looking away once more: "I'm tired." From the fall, from working earlier. 'All we angels do is work now.' He used to have an eternity of leisure. 'What type of eternity do I have now?' No — no, he had to push those thoughts away. Thinking too much was never good. Angels were made to be dutiful and devoted, not to think. "I said I'm tired, Samyaza."

There were noises now from the courtyard, the other angels, bringing their attention to Azazel and Samyaza, and Baraqiel not far behind them. One called out, asking if all was well. They were all dressed, of course, in the same sheets of white.

Samyaza replied, "Everything is fine. We're just discussing who will

say grace.” He loosened his hold, and Azazel moved away from him, moving into the courtyard, approaching the half-dozen angels like he might join them to eat. “But I’d like to take this moment to remind everyone that worship isn’t about our words. It’s our actions that please our Lord Almighty, so we have to live modestly and right, for Him, for all of eternity. This includes not being clumsy, arrogant, or foolish.” There was a second of silence as Azazel halted his steps. “We’re all very blessed to live in Heaven, not only us pure ones, but those angels here who have been so mercifully forgiven by Father—”

“Those angels here,” Azazel parroted before he could stop himself, laughed before he could hesitate. “Say my name, Samyaza! I’m the only sinner in this house.”

“Ah.” A strain in the younger angel’s voice and a sharpness to his eyes. “You’re right that you are. My mistake; I thought you were capable of shame.” Azazel felt his face twitch at that. “But if you’re really so vain — I have no problem addressing you. Azazel, you’re lucky God is so merciful to let you continue living in Heaven after the war,” all of Azazel was beginning to fever, the annoyance and the embarrassment so scorching that he thought he’d start to bleed fire, “so it would be mature of you to learn to behave like a proper angel.”

“Who are you to tell me this?!” Azazel spat, looking back at him. “If you really hate me this much, why not move out? This was my house first!” Now, it was Baraqiel touching Samyaza’s arm, silently asking for him to end their argument. “Or would you rather rally everyone against me and kick me to the streets?”

“This isn’t about who I am,” said Samyaza. “It’s about who *you* are, Azazel. You said it yourself — you’re a sinner. And though the Lord forgave you for your actions during the war, by virtue of having been forgiven, you’re not pure, nor will you ever be again. You need to make an effort to prove that you still belong here. Or are you not grateful? Would you rather have been cast down to suffer with all the demons?”

“It’s hard to imagine,” Azazel seethed, “a suffering any greater than the one here.” He unfurled the healed wings from his back, then flapped them strong, flinging himself up into the open air above the courtyard, but not without hearing the sighs, the gasps, of his housemates. Azazel reached the second-story balcony and landed quickly,

pulling the door to his bedroom open harshly. Stepping inside, he slammed it behind him, but the bang reminded him of his earlier fall down the ladder. The crack of his bones breaking through skin and feather, then the wet agony seeping out from within him. The ache that had consumed him — in a way, it had felt good. Agony had felt pleasant, felt released.

Blind in his anger, he reached his bed, flopped onto his belly over the covers and the cushions. And for a few seconds, there was silence — just him, his breaths. Then, the sounds of eating were filtering through the door; the angels were in regular conversation now, laughing occasionally. There would be some gossip about this all later, surely, but the angels continued as if the argument had never happened, as if Azazel hadn't stormed out, as if there was absolutely nothing wrong in this place they dared to still call Heaven. 'Would they have continued like that, if I weren't here? Would they have pretended I never existed?'

In that temple, the sinner angel was being tortured, his face shrouded in cloth, then flooded with water. They suffocated him, allowed him the air to cry a confession to God above; his apologies, soon, would be drowned by gurgling, agonized cries. This continued while Azazel's housemates were delightfully eating in the yard, breathing in relief that a troublesome sinner was in penance and could not hurt them.

Lying on a warm bed in paradise, the angel wept, 'I wish I were dead.'

CHAPTER 3



C*link, clink.* Stepping onto the road, Samyaza moved past the wooden cart dragged along by two angels, overbrimming with short trees and shrubs being relocated, a few leaves peering at him through the horizontal slabs of the vehicle's birch. 'You want me to help you?' he asked the foliage as it was lugged further away. 'You're already being helped.' Wandering plants would be much safer in enclosed, fenced areas; they just didn't know any better. 'That is why God entrusts your care to us.' A brow twitched at his own thoughts. 'We're the closest living things to Him.' Ahead, there was a house as inconspicuous as the many that lined the street, and Samyaza approached its single open door, fixed into sterile white walls. 'And we will soon be loved by Him once again.'

Samyaza shut the way in, draping himself in the dark, before crossing a corridor for yet another door, opening, then climbing down about a dozen steps. At the moment he reached the cellar — some dim candlelight where wine had once been — a certain angel was staggering backward right before him, yelping and stumbling onto a pile of crates. With a clang, he fell onto it, then groaned. Samyaza chuckled, "There you are, Danel." From where Danel had stumbled from, two angels were inching forward; the one laughing, his arms still raised in the

shove he had thrown out, was Kokabiel. At his side, as always, was Baraqiel. "Where have you been?"

More mean snickering — this from six angels sitting on the collection of old divans and couches against the cellar's candleless wall. Their eyes were all on Danel, who was very quickly jumping back onto his feet and snarling, "I was with the sun." He was the angel of the sun, after all. "What, did you really think that I turned my back on you angels so easily?" He dusted off his tunic. "You asked me to look at Earth, so I did. Did you think I'd return immediately?"

Samyaza stared, then asked, "You weren't involved in the last penance?"

"Me? Oh no." Danel snorted. "But I did hear all about it. The sinner tried to kiss my housemate, you see, and my housemate is the one who started the mob against him."

"I heard," said Baraqiel, though quietly, "that it wasn't a kiss."

"I don't care what you heard!" Danel snapped, moving toward them all now, straightening his back like it'd make him taller; he was always far too small in stature for his anger. "What I know is that they punished him by making him drink blessed water until he started spewing it out of his mouth, eyes, and nose. I wish I'd been there to see it."

"Water penance is too popular," murmured Samyaza, turning his head away to stare at the audience of angels lounging and waiting on them. "But that's not what we've dragged you here about, Danel. This isn't about penance among angels."

"It's about penance between us and God," said Danel, chuckling again, "or am I wrong?"

"Tell us," called Kokabiel, in his odd, breathless voice, "what you saw on the sun, Danel."

Danel paused at this, thin eyes narrowing at the angel of stars. "I'm sure that you know everything already. Why should I say it?"

"The sun is the closest star," Kokabiel replied with an air of sweet humor. "I only know the Earth like a spec of green on a faraway hill." He moved toward one of the couches, the angels on it squirming aside to make room for Kokabiel quickly. Sluggish, the angel of stars flopped onto it, his laugh returning, wheezing and inappropriate. "Tell us

about the humans, Danel.” Baraqiel stepped toward his friend, standing right by him, almost protectively. “Tell us, tell us!”

Right outside, Azazel was seated, but not by the front door. Instead, he was in the back alleyway, a narrow passage between buildings, where only two angels could stand side by side and where the road was a bumpy cobble as opposed to the golden streets. For many centuries now, there had been promises by angels of construction to have these restored to pre-war glory, but none of the archangels were demanding it, so there was no urgency among Heaven, who called these “sinner roads” and seemed to prefer that they stay that way. In his hand, Azazel was gently twisting the stem of a magnolia that had fallen from a cart.

“They’re not so bad,” said the angel Armoni, sat against the wall opposite the one Azazel had his back pressed to.

“You were gaging the entire time you chewed,” said the angel Dina, right at Azazel’s side.

“Mm.” Armoni clicked his tongue. “I did, but if they were bad, then I would have spat them out. And you said it’s your first time making them? In that case, you did a good job, and you should be happy.”

At this, Dina nervously took the sides of his basket — woven of henequen and filled with honeyed dates bundled in a patterned cloth — before a little smile bloomed. “I’ll be happy then.”

“Good.” Despite his humor, Armoni’s face shifted little from its usual expression, which was permanently cold, confrontational, untouchable. Azazel thought it was a shame — because Armoni could have been one of the most beautiful angels in Heaven, surely, if he didn’t have that resting scowling face. His curled hair was golden and thick, always tied in a loose braid that cascaded over a shoulder, and on his face were a pair of plump pink lips and grayed eyes. Like any other angel, he wore a stale, colorless tunic, but there were some obvious indents beneath the cloth — by the collar, by the sleeves. The chains of ruby he loved, hidden beneath his clothes. For an angel — it was an immodest amount of jewelry. “Azazel,” he called next, “would you like a date?”

A tiny leaf fell onto the ground from the flower Azazel fiddled

with, but the angel didn't notice. "Oh. Yes." Azazel smiled as much as he could when Dina turned over to him. "I'd love to. Thank you, Dina."

Dina, like Armoni's opposite, was the epitome of purity. His tunic was so long he stumbled over it and nearly all of his dark hair was blanketed by a lace scarf over his head. There wasn't the shine of any single precious stone on him, and when he walked the streets, he maintained his head bowed meekly. Though, here, he was joyfully reaching for one of his dates, saying, "I made them for my housemate." He plucked two, then extended his hand to offer them to Azazel. "But I can't find him."

"If you'd like, you can stay with me," Armoni suggested, one gray, speckled wing creeping out, only to flap by his face and fan it idly. "I'm alone now that my housemate has abandoned me too."

Azazel frowned. "He was serious?"

Armoni hummed, then tilted his head back at the two angels. "Can you blame him? If I could get away from all this hate by moving to the other side of Heaven and getting away from sinners, I would. Besides, he never liked me all that much. We were only living together because his old housemate fell during the war, and his house was destroyed, and he was desperate for a nice bed to sleep on. He didn't know about my demonic, sinful nature, then."

Dina huffed. "Armoni, don't say that."

"Are even jokes forbidden now?" Armoni snickered again, but this time purely to himself.

"It's only that," Dina said, "I really am worried about my housing situation. My roommate always says I should be living with another forgiven sinner. What if he kicks me to the streets? Oh, and did you hear about the last penance?" Azazel was planting the date into his mouth, frowning at the misplaced bitterness. "It was a friend of Danel's housemate, and I heard he's being run out of his house. It feels like all of Heaven is trying to round up all us forgiven angels to one side of the city..."

"It's always that Danel," Armoni grumbled.

"It is," replied Azazel. "It's always Danel. That reminds me — I heard from Baraqiel that he's always rude and impatient with Kokabiel."

I think it's a complex he has — he'd rather be the angel of stars than just the sun."

"Well, I would be impatient with Kokabiel too," Armoni joked, only to be chastised by the two angels with him.

While in the cellar of the nearby house — that same Danel was pacing, waving an arm irritably as he said, "I always see them at dawn — the humans. They work all day. And they starve, they fight every animal they come across and grill it over the fire, and they suffer." Over his head, he wore a scarf that obscured nearly all of his hair, that only exposed the muted brown skin of his face and his dark-green eyes and button nose. "They die, and when they die, they're buried by those that know them."

"What happens," asked one angel, "after they die?"

"The animals on the Earth eat them and the plants as well." Danel crossed his arms and moved his jaw, clenching and unclenching. "Every critter that a human spends their lives stepping on creeps up to them in death. And eats them."

"Penance," said Kokabiel, in such a tone that it could have been a joke but Samyaza was unsure.

Danel ignored it: "All this to say that— I don't know." He stopped where he was, turning a scowl to Samyaza. "They live wretched lives. Sometimes, the demons — I see them too — attack and butcher the men and women, but oftentimes, the humans die filthy deaths all on their own. They're sinners." He jerked his head toward the stairs, the way out of their meeting location. "But what does any of that have to do with us, Samyaza? If we meddle with human affairs, we're wasting our time. The Lord has judged them as He has done to the demons, and it's better to deal with the sinners in Heaven — the angels who should have fallen in the war for Heaven, the angels who were granted forgiveness when they have proven time and time again that God's mercy is wasted on them." And he turned back to the other angels in the room. "We can't lose sight of what we want."

"What is it," Samyaza replied, slow, "that we want?"

Azazel lifted his head and smiled when a few angels that he recognized as forgiven sinners walked up from one end of the alley and greeted the three sitting ones with happy salutations, then embraces.

Dina offered them dates, and one of the new angels revealed a small, stringed instrument hidden in his robes, saying he'd been hoping to find a place to sing where no non-sinner would hear and punish him. Angels were not allowed to sing anymore, after all.

Because Danel merely made a disgruntled noise, Samyaza stepped toward him and said, "Heaven's glory must be resorted. It's been an eternity now and, still, the plants do not listen to us, the sun you clean of spots each day keeps spitting flares, Kokabiel says the stars continue to scream, and the Lord no longer speaks to us, nor does He allow us to partake in any of His creation. There is nothing in His eyes toward us angels but disdain."

"And what would it do to deal with the humans?" Danel huffed. "You won't listen to me! The humans are all damned. God has judged them, and if we involve ourselves, then He will see us as mingling with His enemies."

"God judged Adam," said Samyaza, "and He judged Eve, but the humans alive now do not even know the Lord punishing them. And consider that the Lord extended forgiveness to the sinners who chose not to fall behind Lucifer. He has not extended forgiveness to the humans yet." He swallowed harsh, quick, and added, strongly, "If we return the humans to our God, then surely, He will see how good we are, how we can be trusted with His creation."

By Azazel, the sinner angel of music settled, and he strummed, singing in a whisper, "They tell us that we are unworthy of Heaven, unworthy of love. What is there to do? They say forgiveness isn't forgetting, and the day God saved us — they rue."

Swallowing, finally, the date, Azazel enjoyed the music, however quiet it was. Silence was a plague in post-war Heaven — chatter in the streets bordering on extinct between the buildings, some discernibly abandoned, the windows covered, the front gardens sitting nearly devoid of life. Azazel, turning his head to see out into the main street, saw one such house — all the life of it drained, the color of the walls dimmed, still curtains obscuring where one might peer inside to see nothing more than porcelain tiles without the usual squirming designs. The kitchen was likely empty, the bedrooms stale, the halls lacking any of the invading greenery of trees, vines, flowers. Maybe the house stub-

bornly belonged to the pre-war times and would be demolished, like many others, maybe turned into a temple. A temple built over the grave of a fallen angel's memories.

He could see a stone monument, too, one of the post-war codes on Heaven living. 'Lord knows Samyaza has made me read all the stone monuments, the scrolls, the glyphs, and the letters — each saying I should've fallen to the sea of fire, and God does not love me anymore.'

At his side, still singing — "The stars mourn for us, Lord, our God; they say we were deceived; if you are so good, then why leave us to no more than grieve? They tear our clothes; from their seats, they jeer; they set us up to fall. Lord, is there any love you have left? Some of us were once your best. But now the city of angels wants us dead—"

Azazel could open his mouth and join in singing about life, but he was embarrassed by it. He thought the story of his life wasn't much of a story, really — an empty space of memories, sometimes connected, but only if you saw them from afar, like stars turning constellations. He had been born on a constellation; his first memory had been of dust, heat, and dull drone of the void. Or, at least, that was what he'd been telling himself, but he couldn't be sure anymore. Many millennia had passed since, and the only sensations he was sure of were the feelings of unplaced familiarity whenever he painted a star. But, perhaps, God had created him modestly, and Azazel had forgotten and fabricated this story. A lie you repeat so many times you begin to believe in, for your own sake. Belief, faith — the same bones of truth and lie.

Samyaza continued to his listeners: "I'm certain. You've all listened to me thus far, and now that it's all becoming real, you can't stop out of cowardice." He swallowed. "I despise the sinners like all of you do."

"And something must be done," said Danel, stiffly, "about them."

'Something must be done.' That was all Samyaza ever heard. The sinners are lazy, they don't worship well enough, they aren't grateful enough. "God has judged them already." But he was careful not to sound too sympathetic. "If He wanted them cast down to the seas of damnation, He would have done it in all the time that's passed since the war." He was adamant now to stop allowing the subject to drift away from the humans. "But the humans are not like us angels." With dual relief and fear, he could see the tide of opinion among the present

angels turning — they were nodding, murmuring to one another. “We can help them,” Samyaza insisted. “We can show the new generation of man what it means to live for our Lord, our Creator. All we need to do is ask one of the archangels. Uriel, Gabriel, or Raphael, if we must.” Michael — Samyaza knew better than to ask for Michael.

Kokabiel laughed. “Uriel will tell us all to burn!”

“Then Gabriel it is,” Samyaza said.

Azazel took a shuddering breath, turned to his closest friends, and whispered to Armoni that he wanted to leave. At first, making no sign of even having heard, Armoni was still, but he soon nodded. He laid a hand on Dina’s and murmured for him to grab his basket and bid farewell to the other known sinners.

The youngest angel replied with a soft smile and did as told, going to press a kiss to the cheeks of everyone that he could. Angels always took so long with greetings and with exits — each angel needed a kiss on the cheek, an embrace, a promise to meet again or a note of how long it had been since they saw one another. When Armoni dragged Dina away and down the alley, Dina was still waving and calling goodbyes.

“Yes,” said Baraqiel softly. “You’re right, Samyaza. Gabriel can speak to God for us. All this time since the war, we’ve done much better work in placing the focus of angels on worshiping. If we taught this to humans, He might be pleased.”

An angel spoke out in agreement, and another said that it would be no trouble to at least try speaking with God. A third, named Turiel, laughed that it would at least give them something to do. Kokabiel was giggling once again, to himself — he always was.

But Danel’s brow was furrowed, and he sighed, stepping back, saying, “Let me mull it over in sleep.” He moved, passed by Kokabiel, and said, “And, you, come and speak to me soon. I can feel the stars pulling on the sun.” Kokabiel raised a hand dismissively, smiling too wide, while Baraqiel quickly stepped closer again, almost between Danel and his friend. The angel of the sun merely rolled his eyes and grunted for Samyaza to give him time to think as he stomped toward the stairway.

The three sinners were, at this moment, stepping into the main

gilded road, just momentarily. Azazel said, “I wanted to go and pick up some silver from one of the smiths so that I could make new utensils.”

“Hm?” said Armoni. “I had no idea you were so good at metal-work.” Beside him, Dina laughed good-naturedly.

“Well, I’m not the angel of metal, definitely not,” said Azazel. “But do you remember Moloch? He fell, but he used to be a friend of mine. He worked with gold and metals was all he talked about—”

“Oh, look at that!” came a familiar shout. “Sinners running their dirty feet all over our precious roads.”

The three turned in an instant, but Armoni was the first to bite back: “Leave us, Danel. Don’t you have work to be doing?” Instinctively, Azazel tugged Dina behind him, as if he could hide his presence though Danel had obviously already seen them and so had all the many angels passing by, who immediately looked over.

“Don’t any of you?” Danel laughed, then nodded his head at Azazel. “I heard Samyaza had to heal you after you fell. Fitting, hm?”

Instead of arguing, Azazel bit the inside of his cheeks hard, nearly enough to draw blood, to remind himself that he was trapped in flesh, and if he acted out, God would perhaps strip him to no more than meat, like a human. He tugged on Armoni’s arm, and then Dina’s, and with a glower and a raised chin, he led his friends away.

Danel didn’t look impressed; his eyes narrowed, his nose scrunched. After the angels had left him many steps behind, he spat, “A torturer, a thief, and a whore!” A few other passing angels turned and saw, and they chuckled to themselves. “Everyone move out of the way of those three! They’ll tempt you to sin! They’re the scum of Heaven!” Another angel joined in the jeering, but most simply kept to themselves, murmuring, some snickering — all letting it happen. “Something must be done with them!”

CHAPTER 4



Samyaza said he wouldn't like to tell Raphael about their scheme, then urged the angels to go to Gabriel instead. Easily, he could imagine the angel of healing, frown evident in its tone, asking Samyaza not to attempt anything that could upset their Father; he would take Samyaza's wrist too, surely, and furrow his brows and add, "Brother, what is this? I've long been telling you to be happy with what you have," or "Is this ambition in you?" or perhaps even, "I thought that all the ambition in you had long had its flame die out."

With no other recourse, then, Samyaza gathered his followers, even the still-grumbling Danel, to the house of Gabriel in the far east. He was the easiest to talk to, he said. 'If he denies us, he'll be the gentlest,' he didn't.

And, as promised, Gabriel was easy to talk to. He smiled when he opened the door to seven angels, and it blossomed into a full grin when Baraqiel stepped forward with gifts — a cornstarch drink and sweet bread. They ushered the archangel into his living room, gesturing for him to sit. Samyaza began simply — detailing the state of Heaven — and caught Gabriel's brows curving sadly as he sipped from the mug. Smoothly, Samyaza tried transitioning to the topic of humans, listening to the angels with him shift from foot to foot, breathe out to fill the silence in between Gabriel's slurping; he said that if the angels helped

the humans, perhaps God would accept the humans back into His grace, and that the angels would gain His love once more.

Gabriel replied, “Don’t say things like that. God loves us,” but admitted that he missed stringing comets to orbits up in the sky. So, licking his lips, the kind archangel suggested that he could speak to God; and to a choir of hitched breathes, Samyaza said that he and his friends could speak with the Lord personally. Danel hacked. Gabriel flushed but said, “I suppose I can ask Him to speak with you.”

Samyaza smiled. “Thank you, brother.” But once they’d left, Samyaza just about ran, trying to escape Danel’s grabbing and snarling. He thought this would be the best course of action. Gabriel couldn’t understand how serious they all were about this, or at least how serious Samyaza was. He had to be the one to speak to God, to express the desperation of his plea. With that thought, he returned home, before his housemates Kokabiel and Baraqiel could catch up, and hurried in only to stop and stagger in place when Azazel turned a corner, almost ramming into him. They both stopped, stared, before Azazel narrowed his eyes and hummed at him before brushing past quickly. They exchanged no words.

Within a week, Gabriel appeared to Samyaza while he was healing a few injured construction angels in the northwest and instructed him to meet God when the next eclipse arrived.

For the first confrontation, the angels did some light preparation. They gathered, went through some ideas and some doubts — Danel had nothing but the latter — and then went ahead to rid themselves of flesh at the first hint of a shadowed sun. They climbed upward with every four sets of wings or six, or some couple wheels, flying, crawling, past Heaven and past the cosmos, to step onto the ceiling of actuality in all its glistening colors. From there, the way to the Throne was as forward as finding your own feet. And, not unexpectedly, Uriel was there — in the usual terror of blinking spheres and gleam of fervent stares.

Beside him, there was God the Father, who did not leave His Throne many days now, if any at all. Though there are not days in Heaven, of course — merely the measure of them from an Earth, an insignificant spec in the sea of cosmic sand. But Samyaza felt like a spec

himself before the Lord, and he thought that if God loved Earth, then He could love an angel.

“Our Father,” Samyaza greeted the faceless universe, with His expressionless expressions, His undivided divisibles. Divisibles was correct; He was like the work of an equation caught in your head, shifting numerals, finding each direction inconclusive. A division by zero — that was the color of Him. “Our Lord. We come with a prayer.” The Lord said nothing, remaining still whereas the rest of the world moved all about Him, like numbers of a clock, chasing after a hand they couldn’t find.

Uriel was the one who spoke. Angry, his voice struck at the angels in an echoing, “Why have you come?” Samyaza replied that he wanted no more than to make his Father happy. Gabriel was not far from Uriel, but he said nothing, a pair of his flamed wings covering his face well enough to hide the details but, somehow, not able to hide his uncertainty. He said nothing and neither did God each time Samyaza nervously addressed his Creator, which he had only seen once before during the war for Heaven. Uriel ordered them, “Leave,” once, twice, a thousand times, before Samyaza contended that this arguing would go nowhere.

Some hours wasted, then the angels returned to Heaven to sleep.

Danel was furious, of course, running up behind Samyaza and grappling his arm, but Samyaza was frowning and thinking, ‘That was it?’ Surely, it couldn’t be. They would have to try again, to save their dignity at least.

So, the angels met once more in their cellar, argued, before heading back toward the dome of light over Heaven, breaking through it, hunting for the Throne.

This second time, God did speak, but it was only a single word — “Continue,” as Samyaza appeared ahead of all the others. Over the tiny noises of reeled, tinged surprise behind him, Samyaza stuttered and faltered in his flying. But he, as ordered to, continued: he argued that the humans alive now had never known Him and thus never had the chance to love Him. Next, he asked God if He was beginning to agree, but God didn’t reply, so the angels left, and once again, they strengthened their case. They added practical steps; they said that they could go

to Earth and live among the humans, and they could describe to them the riches of the celestial city. They could even tell them of eternal life.

On the third meeting, they came with a few calculations, suggesting the minimum amount of tunics they'd need for a year away from Heaven, but the proposed number was too great, which Uriel coldly pointed out, because they weren't sure how often to change clothes on Earth. Angels, unfortunately, changed clothes excessively, sometimes on a whim or to match their mood. Samyaza remembered wearing dark colors before the war; he'd always been gloomy, even before he had any reason to be. At this, God spoke again, offering that they would need more than a hundred angels on their trip. Samyaza proposed two hundred, and God said that would be enough.

On the fourth meeting, they came with specifics on supplies — a short weapon to ward away demons but not frighten the humans. God conversed some more. On the fifth meeting, they bowed before their King and had come with a map of the Earth — where only one green continent lay — and the Lord indicated what areas were no good for angels to roam. Between all these meetings, Samyaza and his angels were feeling their hopes inflate, though cautiously. Would God really offer them this? 'Have we convinced Him? Is He really as merciful as we always say? Will we go to Earth after it was forbidden in the aftermath of evil to leave this city without your blessing?'

It was on the sixth attempt that the Lord finally did more than respond brisk and curt, simply answering or suggesting. Amid Samyaza and Danel exchanging some words, the great God before them raised a hand, and all the angels fell silent; there weren't many of them, just seven angels, then Uriel and Gabriel. All Samyaza could do was hold his breath — though he, of course, had no breath in a breathless place — and prayed his Father knew that in the deepest pits of his heart, he was earnest for this. Maybe there was a little selfishness within him, maybe he only wanted to help the humans because he wanted to help himself, but it was earnest.

'But you know, Lord,' he thought, 'that all I really wish is for you to love us again.' If he could swallow, swallow painful through a throat made of fire, he would. 'I'm not anyone great. You've ensured I'm no

one. I'm an angel of healing, but a lesser angel of healing. I'm lesser. Won't you take pity on someone lesser?'

The Lord said, "Gabriel. Come forward."

From one of His sides, a six-winged creature — each feather streaming — filtered out, and he looked like a lily when certain light struck him and like pearl when shadows did. When Gabriel moved toward the Lord, he flew as if he were walking, and when he landed on the Lord's mighty, open palm, he did it with elegance. "Yes, Lord?" came the small angel's voice.

"You make the decision."

"Me, Lord?"

'Him?' Samyaza blinked one of a thousand eyes; he was made of heads and flames.

The Lord tossed His hand, made the angel standing there hop and stumble. "Should these angels who've come here with their case visit Earth to guide man in goodness?" Samyaza wondered what God's palm felt like, if it was like the heat of all the galaxies. "Do you believe that man can be saved?"

Gabriel fluttered his spindly wings, then shifted. "I do, Father." Through the feathers shielding his face, he peeked an eye out and let its gaze sear Samyaza. "I think it's a wonderful idea. The humans on Earth alive now do not know you, and I think angels could teach them very well about your eternal love. You are merciful, Father. I pray you give them a chance."

"And what of you, Uriel?" the Lord asked next, though He didn't move. "What is your opinion?"

"Man had everything in Eden," said Uriel. "And they chose to discard it for the devil. You need not extend mercy to them. They already chose death."

"Adam and Eve chose death," Gabriel argued. "The humans alive are not Adam and Eve. Is it fair man suffers for what they did not do?"

"They have committed their original sin," replied the forever drone of Uriel's voice, which may have come from every direction, "and each human child carries the blood of their predecessor. They carry the sins of their parents, who ate the fruit they were instructed not to touch; the seed of that sin carries from the mouth of Adam and Eve through

their offspring. Even if their sin could be forgiven, what have the humans done that makes them worthy of God's love?"

Gabriel spoke again, but slow and breathy, as if each word was a sigh, "We do not watch the humans closely, so you cannot say that they are undeserving either."

"All a human can do," said Uriel, "is sin."

Feeling a sudden coldness stabbing him, Samyaza wanted to grab the archangel, shake him, and tell him to stop getting in his way. 'Six meetings now,' he thought. 'Six meetings, and we're so close to being granted His permission.' "No," Samyaza said, raising one of his heads, and not minding the heated glare from each eyeball making Uriel up. "You're wrong. Humans lived before they ate that fruit; they have it in their flesh to be good for God. They were deceived." In a burst of his enraged confidence, he said the rued name: "This is the work of *Satan*."

There was no gasping, no noise of surprise, but the air all about them seemed to have grown physically heavier, thickened like water turning blood.

"*Do not say that name here.*" Uriel rose high over them, and it was as if he were playing God, looming over the other spirits, taking the reins of Heaven, of above Heaven, and threatening to cut them loose so that all of paradise would collapse.

Indeed, Samyaza felt his soul lean away before he could stop himself, filled with the itch to leave, to search for the door away from God's Throne and God's paradise, too. Yet he stood his ground, angrier than what could possibly be appropriate, and flew just some pinches closer. Low, he replied, "I heard Satan wears tunics of human skin. I heard he tortures animals by sawing off their limbs and watching them squirm. I heard Satan fornicates with bulls."

Kokabiel supported him with a laugh: "And he calls himself God!"

"I heard," Danel added, "that Satan seasons his stew with the tongues of children."

"And I heard," said Baraqiel, in his soft voice, "that Satan scorches the Earth and leaves the humans to starve."

The angels handed another chorus of the crimes of the devil, and to that, Samyaza added, "With how Satan roams free and leads the

humans astray, it almost appears as if he's succeeded in corrupting of all the Lord's creation." He looked away from Uriel and faced God, and though he was sure he was craning his heads up to their Father, the weight on his neck made him think that he was really looking down. It struck in him that maybe the whole of existence was actually upside down, and that each time an angel flew, he was really falling, and when the demons fell, they had really been the first to take flight.

There was some silence, neither God nor his archangels spoke, and Samyaza was feeling sweet victory in his chest churning and churning, before the detestable Uriel spoke once more: "The humans had the will to choose their own fate in Eden. They chose evil. There is no success in the devil, for our Almighty Father's greatest triumph is His creation of free will."

Samyaza hadn't anticipated that response. It felt like his heart — which had been sitting at the cusp of an eardrum — as if preparing to beat it to announce God had decided to love them once more — slipped out and shattered. "Father," he addressed, and the wobble to his voice was becoming desperate as he looked at the universe centralized into a marble, saw the Lord's face. "Will humanity truly not be saved?" And the angels would not be either, and everything would remain as it was.

Uriel answered for God once more: "Angels have no need to know that."

Danel called out, anger hardly masked, "But to enact Father's will, we must have some semblance of what it is!"

Baraquel made a noise of affirmation, then added, "If you were to share some of your thoughts with us, Almighty Lord, we could worship you more righteously."

Uriel said, "Do not demand anything from the Creator."

"We're making no demand," Samyaza replied, voice trembling in his frantic willing. "It's only—"

"This conversation has gone on long enough," Uriel cut off. "The Lord has made it clear that humans lost favor with Him the moment they were banished from Eden, and now they are free to be hounded by Satan and his demons on Earth. The first man and woman made that

decision for themselves, and they will suffer the consequences of it. Now, leave us.”

Samyaza could not reply, and neither could his friends; they began to inch back, then hurriedly left. This time, the angels didn’t gather to plan as they always did. They draped on their incarnate remains, walking along the stars as they did, and Samyaza, silently, hurried toward his home with his housemates, while Danel made some snide comments to Turiel. It may have been “Samyaza shamed us,” or “God will laugh at us all.” And when the lesser angel of healing entered his home, he murmured at Kokabiel and Baraqiel to leave him alone some moments. He thought they might argue, but they left his side without a word.

For many seconds later, Samyaza stood in place, planting his hand on a pillar and hoping the coarse feel on his fingers would return him to the flesh world. He clenched his eyes shut, felt the coming pound of his head; it wasn’t common for an angel to be going between the materiality of Heaven and the abstract Throne of God. No angel should be turning spirit so often; it wasn’t right. Angels belonged in Heaven, under God’s watchful gaze, not on Earth and not too close to Him either. Get too close to God and He will cast you down; the devil had taught them that. ‘So what am I doing then? Stepping up to the Lord and asking if I can leave His city? We belong here. We can’t have anything but this.’

Muttering, nearby. Samyaza fluttered open his eyes, temples still throbbing, then he craned his neck around the column that he leaned against. Staring into the courtyard, he noted Azazel there, back turned to him as he rocked dangerously on a chair’s hind legs. In his hands, there was a porcelain figure of a fish, and Azazel was painting it with a wooden brush and bristles made of dried root. He spoke to the fish as he flicked his wrist and drew a curl of black, but his words were incomprehensible. He painted the eyes, the mouth.

Samyaza used to like his eyes painted. Far in the ancient past, Azazel had many times forced him to sit and stay still. Samyaza had always grumbled, Azazel had always grinned and teased him, his face close to his, before beginning to paint. There had been this indiscernible speaking beneath his breath that time too — like enchantments, like

prayers. Samyaza would always stare at his reflection in water afterward — the new shadow on his eyes making them appear sunken, but it was a look he liked. Before the war, they — Azazel and Samyaza — were already bickering, but it had been different then. Everything had been different then.

One day, Azazel will ask Samyaza why he rallied his angels and returned to God for the seventh time. Samyaza will say that he's not certain, but he'll confess that he watched Azazel paint a fish. And Azazel will frown.

Samyaza appeared before God, his angels behind him, and he saw that Uriel was, strangely, absent whereas Gabriel was once again on His palm. Without reason, Samyaza imagined the Lord curling His hand into a fist to squash the kind angel there, and they would all bear witness to Gabriel's legs twitching as the life was choked out of him. But this fantasy was ridiculous, was offensive: angels could not, after all, die.

Before any one of the angels could speak — even Samyaza, whose mouths were open to shout — the Lord gave His verdict: "The last time, I asked Gabriel if I should grant you this. And I have decided on his word." Samyaza felt all of his spirit come loose, and his heart, wherever it may have been, clench. "Two hundred of you will travel to the Earth." Not even the great wings over Gabriel's face could hide his smile. "And Samyaza will be your leader, along with nineteen others that he so chooses." Yet, before there could be any jostle or rumble of excitement, the Lord spoke to the angel in His palm, "Is there anything you'd like to add, Gabriel?"

Gabriel nodded and fiddled all his fingers together quite sweetly. "Some of the forgiven angels should go, as well."

'No,' Samyaza thought in an instant; if he were flesh, he was sure he would have burst into flames of not fury but something as furious, something as horrified. And he could feel the stark terror of those with him, as if they had all unsheathed blades and dug them into Samyaza's sides.

The Lord amended, "Twenty of the two hundred will be those angels who sinned but were forgiven and not cast down." When the

gaze of God fell upon him once more, Samyaza shuddered. "You will arrange and manage every part of this."

"Yes, my Lord," Samyaza said.

"Leave me now," He said, "you have only days to prepare."

"Yes," Samyaza said again. "Yes, Heavenly Father."

'My God,' Samyaza thought and realized the Lord had granted him six chances to retreat; he had not taken them, had not even taken the time to ponder what he was doing. 'What have I done?'

CHAPTER 5



“**M**y only source of life,” prayed Azazel, knees on merciless planks, “is you, our Father.”

“Go on,” said an angel, then whispered something beneath his breath that could have been *whore*, but that was unlikely — surely, Azazel’s mind was playing tricks, a miniature devil in his head, chortling and giggling.

“Hallowed be,” Azazel continued, though softer, “your name. Forgive us for our sins.” He glanced, upward and to the right, at the angel of prayer, who was stepping back and turning his own head at another one of the kneeling angels. “And allow your mercy to extend past eternity.” There was a certain smear in his heart, Azazel thought, ‘like paint on my face too long, coming away whenever I fail to resist the temptation of touching my lips, my cheeks, my eyes.’ What was he thinking? Why was he thinking this now? There were ten other angels on their knees worshipping beside him, curled forward like ‘a flower when it begins to wilt.’

On the altar, an angel was still bound, gargling on the holy water they’d poured over a cotton sheet on his face. Pained and anguished moans continued to escape, but no crying anymore. A mere residue of misery.

“Azazel, continue.”

Gaze flickering back to the floor, Azazel wanted to spit that he'd led enough prayers, that he didn't want to be here, that he wanted to be in his room, asleep, clinging to the dreams that were really happy fantasies, except for all those times the nightmare of living leaked into his mind, into the devil in his head's perfect hands. "I—" What were the words? "We—" It was always *we*; why was that? "We praise your name for all of eternity. Forgive us." Oh, he'd already said that verse. "Pardon me, I meant— Full of grace you are. Lend us your love, despite all that we have done."

"Amen," offered the angel of prayer.

"Amen," said the chorus of kneeling angels, which included Azazel. Almost instantly after, he planted a hand on the flooring and used it to brace his weight, pushing himself up to his feet and turning away from the head of the temple's body and the tragic aftermath of penance, trying to seek out the door before the other angels made their way to it. Raising a hand, he fingered the scarf over his braids, finding the lace at the trim itchy and wanting to pull it off — but there was a hand on his shoulder instantly. And then the call of his name.

"Azazel," said the angel of prayer, "wait a moment, will you?"

Swallowing, Azazel didn't twist around, watching the angels around him head toward the entrance, feeling like an object watching the wind rush past. He remembered when he'd fallen and damaged a wing in this very chapel, not long ago. Samyaza's angry eyes, the bite of his words. "Of course." He looked over, not realizing he'd been avoiding the angel's face. "Can I help you?" Azazel knew this straight-haired, fair-skinned angel was a friend of Samyaza's so he had to act proper.

The angel opened his mouth, closed it, then removed his hand, gesturing instead. "I wanted to talk to you."

There were no seats in the temple, nor was there much besides dull flooring and oppressively colorful paint on the low, dome ceiling and the plaster walls; the illustrations on them were all of the Lord's creations, including the angels, but not in the incarnate forms that they were all most familiar with, rather their other selves — the eyes and the mouths, the flames, and the wings. The Lord was there too, in a near-perfect depiction of what He really appeared to be, which was nothing

— a void — a dark canyon staring down at Azazel and all the other angels lovingly praying to it so that it would not reach down and eat them. Sometimes, Azazel wondered about the demons, who must’ve been cut open and spooled of each wing and eye on their inside to be left smooth red, made of flesh and tissue and no more. The demons, Azazel’s old friends.

Because Azazel hadn’t responded, the angel said, “You know that I’m your friend.” Azazel raised a brow; he hadn’t known that. “Of you and the other forgiven angels. That’s why I called you all here to pray. It helps, doesn’t it?” There was a little edge to his tone, almost insult, as if he were offended no one had noticed his act of charity.

“Yes,” Azazel decided to say, only because he didn’t know what he was supposed to make of *helps*. ‘Helps me hurt?’ That’s all he thought the senseless prayers did — make him sit with the dense gravity of his situation, have him shift uncomfortably and squirm and resist pulling his hair out because innumerable years had passed since the Last Judgment of angels, and nothing had bettered and now seemed as if it never would. Prayers were a joke; if God was listening, He didn’t care. Or He was satisfied, happy to see that there was a great rift between the angels who asked for forgiveness post-war and the sanctimonious angels who claimed purity. He hurt; he felt as if his heart was on his tongue and every beat was a throb in pain.

“I,” said the angel, a little echo off the temple’s walls cooing the word back at him. “I wanted to warn you, and all the other forgiven angels, but you especially because I know you’re well-liked.” Was he? Azazel had never thought that. “And because you’re close to Samyaza.” He was sure Samyaza despised him. “And maybe you could ask him for help with this.”

Azazel blinked. “What is this about?”

The other’s gaze darted away from him, to the door, as if to ensure no one was peeking their head in to listen, then he looked back. “Have you walked by the far north recently? Where the ground is dry?”

“I haven’t.”

“Some angels built houses there. They’re not very nice, and they’re quite cramped. It wasn’t a very organized effort, but I believe Danel was involved.”

Azazel waited, but the other wasn't continuing, just eyeing him gravely as if what he meant were obvious. "What does that mean?"

Frustration now, on the other, the color of red — "They want to move you all, Azazel. You forgiven." Forgiven was meant to be the kinder term for angels like Azazel, but the way it was occasionally hissed, it sounded just as bad as *sinner*. "I heard," and his voice was softening now, falling almost to a whisper, "that they want to start a mob, force you all out of your homes, and stuff you in some corner of the city where they won't have to look at you."

"What?" It left Azazel's mouth breathlessly, confusedly. "You mean —?" Azazel loved his house, his courtyard, his little room, the balcony; 'even before the war, I was there, since I was a newborn, I was there.' "No. No, I— Why would—? Where did you hear this, I think you misheard."

The angel of prayer shook his head, slow. "I told you there isn't much organization, there's no leader to this, but soon, there will be. It might be Danel. You know he doesn't like the forgiven, and he's told me that Heaven would be better off with the forgiven out of sight."

Azazel, before he could stop himself, feeling lightheaded — "And what did you tell him?"

"Hm?"

"What did you tell Danel when he said that?" His voice was high, almost hysterical, though how couldn't he be?

"I—" The angel of prayer leaned backward, his brows raising. "Nothing, of course. What did you want me to say?"

"You didn't tell Danel that he was wrong?" Why were Azazel's eyes itching? Why did his throat begin to feel raw like he'd swallowed a heated stone? His breaths came lighter, quicker. "You didn't tell him not to say that? You didn't even think to?"

Sighing, "Azazel, don't be unreasonable."

"You said you're a friend of ours," Azazel replied, so quiet he thought the other maybe didn't hear it. "If that's true, how could you allow an angel to say your friends deserve to be rounded up and trapped in a dry, miserable part of Heaven?"

"You think any part of Heaven is miserable?"

“That’s not what I meant. I couldn’t think of another word. That’s not the point, Ezekiel—”

“But I see that’s how you really feel.” ‘No,’ Azazel was screaming in his head, ‘don’t change the subject, you know that’s not what I mean, listen to me.’ “You’re acting hysterical. Maybe you should go home.”

Forcing a flatness to his voice, Azazel replied, “Why didn’t you tell Danel he was wrong?”

“It wasn’t the time for it. Don’t focus on the wrong things. Go home. Maybe discuss this with Samyaza. He’s close to Danel. He could talk him out of doing anything irrational.” But Azazel didn’t miss that something now lacked from the angel of prayer’s voice — the softness gone, replaced with scratchy irritation. “Goodbye, Azazel.”

Azazel wanted to shove him, but he could imagine how that would spiral; the other angel would see it as proof that Azazel was indeed a hysterical, devious sinner who started fights. So, he kept his mouth shut as he turned around, pulled off the scarf from over his head, then began walking to the door. He should not say another word. ‘Once, someone told me that a pretty angel is a quiet angel.’ It was a joke, something you would tell an angel who would not stop talking.

A pretty angel. It had been, maybe, centuries since the thought of the most beautiful angel surfaced in his mind. ‘Oh, Lucifer.’ The name felt foreign now. ‘If only someone had told you that.’ He didn’t know what had happened to him, but he supposed no one did. Some said the devil had been a liar since his creation, that in God’s hands, he’d stolen some of the yarn of creation and tried to make something of his own. They said the devil defiled himself, then taught it to the other angels to tarnish God’s love. They said Lucifer had betrayed Michael with a kiss.

“Excuse me,” Azazel stepped outside and bumped into a passing pair of strangers, only for one to look down, immediately meet his eyes with a sudden glint that Azazel had become familiar with. “I’m sorry —” It wasn’t quick enough. He was pushed away, made to stumble up against the door.

“Don’t touch me,” said the attacker. “You’ll taint me with sin.”

“I’m sorry.” Azazel simply kept his head down, hoping the angels would get out of his way so he could go find his friends — Dina, Armoni — and embrace them and shriek into their chests at their

coming fate. He, after all, knew the real reason why the angel of prayer hadn't fought Danel on the subject of a forced relocation: secretly, he wanted it. Secretly, all these angels wanted it; they just needed a leader, someone to rally them into action. Already action was happening, but disorganized — soon, an angel would certainly gather the jigsaw pieces of hate and create an image of what they desired. "Please. I only want to go home."

"Heaven is no home for whores," said the other angel, smiling, but stepped aside to let Azazel through.

Hurrying away from both them and the temple, Azazel barely resisted pulling the scarf over his hair again. He headed down the main road to arrive at his house quicker, remaining near the edges of the golden street, not wanting to be noticed and laughed at anymore. Terribly, he was frightened, hurt, and fighting tears of anger, but he knew that would also only draw attention, so he bit his lip, continued onward. 'Sometimes I wish I fell and burned with all my old friends. I wish Lucifer had dragged me down and destroyed me forever. How much longer can I go on living this way?'

But upon arrival home, he headed for the bath. The room was quite quaint, with lightly muraled walls, nearly devoured by the massive, rounded tub in the middle of the room, made of smoothed mahogany wood. It was neighbored by a bench of the same material, carrying golden platters of arranged oils, soaps, and incense, beneath a wide, hopper window. Upon it, as well, there were flowers, orchids chattering with tulips, who twisted over to Azazel curiously, petals fluttering; they knew the angel never bathed at this time. But Azazel chose not to make conversation, turning away, moving toward a tall tree stump, and taking the porcelain water basin over it. With a hefty grunting, he lifted, brought it to the tub, began pouring in some endless water.

"Warm, please," he pleaded, and he watched the surface begin to steam. A soft, relaxed sigh fell from his lips.

The water rose some breaths beneath the brim before Azazel went to set the basin back in its place. Then, he pulled his plain tunic over his head and kicked off his sandals. 'I wish I could wash sin off me.' He reached for some of the oils on the bench, picking out peony and rose,

then returned to the tub. Climbing in, the angel shuddered as the heat gripped a foot, then a leg, then both his lower limbs as he settled in, sinking in. He unscrewed the caps of the two oil bottles before planting one, the rose, on the tub ledge. The other oil — the peony — he dribbled onto a hand before slathering his face and neck with its sweet and floral scent. Then, he took a slow breath, leaned back and stared at the window, the flowers, before setting the flask down. For a while, he soaked in silence, listening to wet ripples and droplets.

He missed his virginity.

If only he'd known then, had known that he would not heal from being pulled onto a bed and gripped below his navel. 'Like a blade,' wounding him, 'twisting into my flesh.' Whenever he washed, the thought stirred of where he could place his hand to feel what he had during the war, though he didn't long to feel it ever again. He felt raw, charred inside, wounded, and everyone looked at him and saw something used, sullied. Dirty. It didn't matter that the soon-to-fall angel, who'd corrupted him, had confessed that Azazel was beautiful softly and that he wanted to teach him pleasure. Azazel had been nervous, the screams of war right outside, but being so adored weakened him, and he'd sunk into the bed as the demon had placed a mouth in this place Azazel wished he'd never learned of. And now he thought of the angel who ruined him with scorn. Hated him, hated himself, wanted to reach down and grip all that he hated, and tear himself even bloodier.

"Azazel."

The angel jumped, twisted his head to the door. "Samyaza—?" The younger angel had just thrown the door open, stepped inside, shut it with a boom, then surged forward. He leaned close, so much so that his breath bumped into Azazel's hitching own, and their noses nearly touched. Though he sat in a pool of hot, smoking water, Azazel felt a shiver shoot its way up his spine.

"You need to listen to me," Samyaza hissed, slow, each word weighted and unbalanced. "First, you cannot, under any circumstances, ruin this. Do you understand? You're impulsive and irrational; you're also untrustworthy." Samyaza didn't react to the other angel's bewilderment. "All the angels take you for a sinner worthy only of eternal torment in a lake of fire."

Azazel's eyebrows drew together. From his frown came the words, "Why are you saying this to me? As if I don't know—!"

"Well, you certainly don't act like it." Samyaza breathed, out through his nose, clenched his jaw. "But that's fine. I'll make things right— I—" He cleared his throat harshly, as if to clear some way for ease, but his shoulders remained tense.

Azazel, staring and puzzled, heard a ripple, then remembered he was naked. He glanced down at himself — in the tub with the water up to his abdomen, steaming but not bubbling. All of himself was exposed, and Azazel shifted backwards, crossed his arms and his legs as if he could shield his entire body that way. "What?" The word left his mouth hushed. "What are you trying to say, Samyaza?"

"Brother," Samyaza said gravely, eyes lifting to his, "we're going to Earth."

"Earth?"

"I made a promise to our Father that two hundred of us angels will travel to the Earth so that we can guide man toward goodness again. We will bring salvation to them, and we will be saved too. All of us angels will be redeemed. The Lord is merciful, and if we do this — if we do this, He will look upon us with love again." No. Azazel didn't believe that for a second; 'Samyaza, did Father really say those words? Did He utter such a promise of forgiveness? Or are you putting your own voice in His mouth? Your own desires?' "And you, Azazel, this is your opportunity to regain the trust of all the other angels. You'll be seen as a hero if you help." Samyaza nodded firmly, too firm, almost as if the one he was really trying to convince was himself.

'He doesn't understand, he'll never understand,' Azazel was beginning to think with nothing short of frustration. 'So long as there are angels that are pure and angels that are forgiven, there will always be division. Resentment, envy, blame. There will never be complete forgiveness, as long as I'm not pure, and I'll never be pure, never again. I'm ruined.' His breaths were coming quicker, hollower — "I don't want to—"

"What?" Samyaza scoffed. "Don't be absurd. It's an order, and it's your duty as an angel of our Father. Don't disappoint Him. Besides,

you won't be alone. Other forgiven angels will be coming with us. Like your friend: the angel of virtue."

Azazel raised his head. "Armoni?"

"Yes, that's his name." Samyaza nodded once more. "But let me make it clear to you that you don't have a choice in this. It's for your own good. Trust me, Azazel. Please." Azazel listened to the water swishing against him again, then he blinked, as if he'd woken from a dream, and so did Samyaza. They stared at one another, Samyaza's gaze flickered down, at Azazel's nakedness, then Samyaza coughed awkwardly. Finally, the lesser angel of healing stepped backward, moving his hands to his hips, rolling his shoulders. He turned his face away, mumbling, "I'll be going to rest. Let's speak again soon. I'll give you more details then."

Azazel hugged his own heated body tighter. "May I bathe in peace now?"

"Do whatever you want." But Samyaza didn't move.

Azazel huffed. "Leave then."

"Oh— Oh, right. Yes. Let me do that." And he left.

CHAPTER 6



“**T**here’s so much noise,” said Dina, peering over the edge of a tall bridge between towers, his lace scarf having fallen to his neck, strands of his dark hair waving in a breeze pacing around them. “Can you two believe this is really happening?” Azazel was leaning against the opposite wall of the bridge, and he opened his mouth, closed it, then turned his head to the angel beside him.

Without any evidence of catching Azazel’s staring, Armoni asked, “So you heard, Dina, everything?”

“Is that why you two invited me on a walk?” Dina laughed a little, peering at the two older angels over his shoulder. “Did you want to tell me about the angels going to Earth? Everyone already knows. If I know, then everyone knows.” Behind him, on the street below, a dozen angels were rushing along, carrying what appeared to be new clothes, new weapons, in wheelbarrows and on their backs. “I heard only two hundred are traveling and that Danel is choosing who.”

“It’s Samyaza,” Armoni corrected. “Though I’m sure Danel is manipulating him.”

At this, Dina fully turned around, his eyebrows drawing together, and he opened his mouth, but Azazel decided to speak before the youngest angel could: “Armoni and I are going to Earth.” Dina blinked. “But, you can’t. You’re the youngest angel. Samyaza says that...” Azazel

found himself frowning, then reaching, taking Dina's arm and tugging him closer. "Come." In an instant, he embraced him tight. "Don't frown like that."

"What will I do?" Dina said it quietly but with a certain rhythm, almost a sad cooing. "I was threatened to be chased out of my house just the other day. Without my housemate and without you two, what will I do? I'll be told to sleep on the streets."

Azazel wanted to say that he would talk to Samyaza, but he'd agreed with him; he'd affirmed Dina was too naive, too young despite all his years of age — 'sometimes, I fear the war stunted you, chopped your roots, and left you unable to grow.' "We won't be away long," he decided to say. "Human lives are so short, just one or two thousand years, I think." He kissed his friend's head. "And Danel is coming with us, so maybe the angels won't go after the forgiven ones as much."

Dina didn't look happy, but he didn't argue, and soon Armoni was sighing, "Lift your chin and don't you dare start crying. When you act this soft, I can see why all the angels hurry to come prod at you." Azazel, sharply, hissed Armoni's name but the angel continued, "We'll be back soon. Azazel just said so, and you should trust him." He grabbed Dina, pulled him back, gave the frazzled young angel a stern look. "And don't spend all your time acting like a newborn. Maybe spend these years trying to figure out who you are." Dina tried to speak. "Don't argue. There's no time. Enjoy us before we go."

Azazel frowned deeply, but he agreed in silence, looking away, down from the bridge that the three would surely get shouted at to leave soon. Dina apologized to Armoni while Azazel's gaze caught a certain angel with feathery layers of dark hair standing by one of the stone monuments lining the street. The crowd of passing angels avoided moving near him, but they nodded in respect. "Phanuel," Azazel whispered, his friends not hearing. The friend of archangel Michael never said a word back to the angels. 'You were stunted too, in the war, Phanuel. Your voice cut out.'

After returning home, Azazel was subjected to Samyaza, who was in his room, who was fiddling with the large cloth bag that Azazel would bring with him. The lesser angel of healing had been helping

him pack, but not out of kindness. “This tunic is too short.” Samyaza reeled it out from the bag. “Don’t bring that.”

“Do you think my shins will entice the other angels to sin?”

Snorting — “No. It’s just not proper. And your paints? Where are they?”

From the doorway, Azazel stared, then he said, “I don’t have any.” His heart felt tugged, almost yanked. “I ran out after painting a fish a little while ago. I haven’t bothered to get more since. Why should I? Painting my face in private just makes me sad.” Stepping closer, he took the tunic from Samyaza’s hands, and he waited to see if the younger angel would say another word, but he didn’t.

‘I miss my heavy face,’ he wanted to say. ‘And the spirals on the back of my hand.’ Once, Samyaza had been much younger, and he had been humming and resting his head on Azazel’s lap. Gingerly, Samyaza had reached for Azazel’s hand and played with his fingers, and he mumbled, softly, that Azazel’s skin paint was beautiful, and that he was beautiful. Azazel had laughed delightfully; Samyaza had been too earnest to flush. Sweet, earnest Samyaza — it must’ve been a fleeting episode of youth.

For the rest of his time spent in Heaven, Azazel avoided him. He busied himself coddling Dina, eating his food, bundling him in blankets, and making him chocolate drinks. Indoors, he tried to keep him, along with Armoni — so that the three of them wouldn’t have to deal with any trouble on the streets before leaving. From the window in Azazel’s bedroom, the angels heard the bustling crowds begin to call those who would leave *Watchers*, since they’d be watching over the humans, but Azazel thought that was rather uninspired, and he shared that opinion with Armoni, who laughed. Too, Azazel mentioned seeing Phanuel, not long ago, and Armoni said, “Hm, I forgot he was still among us. You’d think he’d fallen with how absent he is.”

“You could say the same about Michael.” In the dark, Azazel braided the hair of Dina, who’d fallen asleep on his stomach over the bed.

“I could.”

The day of departure arrived — abruptly, like a stranger at the door too early, smiling too wide and familiar. Azazel awoke wrapped in his

comforter, feeling his body too heavy and his eyes too bleary to crawl out of bed, let alone travel to Earth. For a while, all he could do was stare at the cloth bag at the other end of the room — it was about half his size — that would be making the trip with him. Then, his eyes trailed to the floors and his furniture and the murals he had painted over and over again — there were lilies, daises, fruits, feathers, all meandered into a colorful pattern, great and blinking at him. He clutched his bedsheets a bit tighter.

‘How can I miss a place I haven’t left yet?’ he wondered.

The angel dressed, tying a kerchief over his head, then perfumed himself and packed the perfume, before going about kissing every corner of his room goodbye. A hyacinth on the wall told him that he shouldn’t go, and Azazel whispered that he wouldn’t be long. Angels belong in Heaven, after all. Breathing, he took his luggage and dragged it lazily toward the door, then lingered by the balcony. He listened to the beads in his box braids rattle as he hopped over the railing and took flight. Some strong beats of his wings, then he was high over the seas of angels, of farewells, of gifts and embraces, all drowning the city.

Nowhere else safe to land for a sinner, Azazel headed for the narrow alley where the singer had been, swerving to avoid any others flying high alongside him. He’d planned a meeting place with Armoni, and he was sure that sinner road would lead him there without having to go through the worst of the crowds, past an intersection where a small fountain was. Azazel dropped onto the ground delicately, fluttering his wings a little before tucking them in, walking, listening for the sound of splashing. Instead, he heard mumbling and, soon, saw someone bent over the marble sculpture where an eyeless, cherubic face was pouring water out of its mouth. There was another angel there, sitting on the edge of the fountain, rolling a walking stick between two hands — the archangel Raphael in his woolen cloak, his braid, and his kind eyes.

Samyaza was staring at his reflection, murmurs dribbling from his mouth, these incantations, but there was a frown on his lips that Azazel caught from where he was — half-hiding against a wall and holding his breath. “The water,” Samyaza said, “is unhappy with me. It’s not speaking to me.” One of his sandaled feet dragged against the cobbled

street, then his body moved with it to stand straighter. “Did I do something wrong?” He turned his face to the prince at his side.

“Don’t forget that water is a living thing with moods and whims.” Raphael lowered a hand, skimmed a finger across the surface, tapped it, before the tendrils of dark petals reached out from the ripples to pull themselves out from the water — a blue lotus, blooming. “But it’s also the essence of everything, from where the first life sprouted.”

“Fish,” said Samyaza, with the kind of amusement of a student who’d heard this lesson before, and Azazel smiled at that.

Raphael’s tan cheeks tinted a warm hue. “Yes,” a little bashful, like he was remembering he’d indeed told this story countless times but couldn’t help telling it again. “In the beginning, everything was fire, but then the Lord gathered all the flames into His angels, like putting together a bouquet from a meadow. All that was left, then, was water, and He split it into the water in the Earth and the water in the sky. Have you ever noticed that the abyss above is wet? The universe’s body is just sea, kind enough to let us little flames wander on the ripples. We owe it everything.”

“It’s as if the Lord Himself is the water.”

“Our Father is everything. He is the fire and He is us, but— Yes.” A little laugh danced out from between Raphael’s lips. “You’re right. Please forgive me. It’s been a long time since I’ve seen you. I’m sorry for not seeking you out earlier, brother.”

“Don’t apologize. You’re so busy, and so am I. There are,” a falter, barely noticeable, “always angels to heal. Will you be able to handle them all while I’m gone?”

Azazel wondered if Samyaza was remembering, perhaps, the feel of crisp wood at his fingertips as he’d sat at the table, watching Raphael murmur to some water in a basin, nearly cooing to it, before he healed an angel’s broken arm, following a rough fight in a stadium. Raphael would’ve smiled then gestured for young Samyaza to come closer, to see, as clear droplets seeped into the scrapes and swells of the angel’s injury. ‘I like to call healing,’ Raphael would’ve said, ‘miracles. Little miracles.’

Raphael tittered softly. “It’s too late for you to be hesitating.” But

he eyed the younger one with unadulterated warmth. “Brother, you’ll do well.”

Samyaza said, “I’m nervous.”

“You won’t let anyone down.”

A corner of Samyaza’s lips twitched. “You always know what to say, Raphael.”

Raphael reached for him, and his fingers grazed the taller angel’s wrist. “I don’t know about that.” He gripped Samyaza where he touched him, tugged him down to plant a simple kiss on his forehead. “Have faith.”

“I have faith.” Murmuring, like a prayer. “I have faith, I have faith.”

“Do you?”

“I trust in our Father.” Inexplicably — Samyaza had begun to tremble, as if he were aching.

“But what about you?” Raphael smiled, soft. “Have faith in yourself, too, Samyaza.”

Azazel swallowed, then fingered the straps of his bag, and stepped outward into the intersection of sinner road and angel road. “Oh, Samyaza. Raphael.” Immediately, he bowed his head. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“You’re not interrupting,” Raphael said, his touch drifting like breeze away from Samyaza. “It’s good you’re here. I need someone to walk my student to the center.” The smile he gave Samyaza was teasing, but sweet nonetheless.

Frowning, Samyaza asked, “You won’t come, Raphael?”

The prince shook his head. “I have some other things to do.” Azazel quirked a brow; what could be more important than bidding farewell to the Watchers, who were meant to bring the angels renewed salvation? “Uriel and Gabriel will be there to give you their blessings. Go now. You have my love and prayers.”

“Thank you,” Samyaza replied, then hesitated, like he wasn’t sure whether to embrace or kiss Raphael before he decided on neither. Turning on his heel, he called, “Come, Azazel.” He walked, chin lifted too high, as Azazel resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

Without any shame for affection, Azazel moved toward Raphael and hugged him loosely. “I hope we return very soon,” he said, then

sought to draw away from his warmth but quickly stopped — the archangel's breath brushed his ear.

"Take care of him," Raphael whispered. "He knows how to heal a bone, but not a soul."

"I don't think he wants me looking after him," Azazel murmured, just quiet enough that Samyaza wouldn't hear when he started calling for him to hurry — so not very quiet at all.

"You know how some angels are," Raphael chuckled.

Without another word, the younger angel stepped away and bowed his head like he'd done before, more sincerely this time. He hurried toward Samyaza, who was waiting for him by an open gate out into one of the main streets, but he didn't look at Azazel when he stepped up beside him. They stared at the crowd — the noise of chatter and footsteps and rattle and thump of belongings — *clanks* and *clinks*. Flickering his gaze, Azazel saw that the other had an odd quiver along his mouth, and he thought, 'So it's true that you're scared.' Should he comfort him? 'No. Why should I? He's rude to me.' And, yet, he found his lips parting to say, "Samyaza?" The lesser angel of healing replied with a low grunt. "Don't be nervous. Or else you'll ruin everything, for me."

Samyaza snorted. "Are you trying to make me feel better?"

"No."

"Good. I don't need it."

"Of course not."

There was something unsaid, something not in their words but in the lax of their bodies, the relief of their breath. They would be alright. It would all be alright. There had been a time when ill happenings were unheard of, but even now in the post-mortem of angel innocence, they knew that all would be well.

Together, they stepped out into the crowded streets, walking so close that their sides brushed, but they exchanged no more words, and once they arrived at mosaic flooring, in the shadow of the great Fountain of Life, they went their separate ways. The fountain itself was wholly rebuilt, not nearly as marvelous as it had been in the pre-war years — though its carvings were smoother, and its designs sharper, and its peaks taller, gone was the charm of its original rough, unskilled

corners that left much to be desired. The room for desire was now absent, replaced with polish. Some objects are made when rebuilt, when cleaned, when edited — but some objects die in their fix. The desire was dead now, and the water fell in streams.

Azazel found Armoni and Dina, startling at the sight of the latter, who had teary eyes and a purse to his lips. He hadn't thought Dina would find the courage to come see his only friends abandon him, but here he stood, beside Armoni, who had a large cloth bag settled by his feet. Once Azazel neared them, he spoke softly, careful not to say anything that would make the youngest cry again, but it seemed Dina was done crying and was left, now, raw. They'd all said goodbye too many times, perhaps — so Azazel told him to be safe while they were gone, and to make the most of Heaven, in whatever way he could, but asking a sinner to enjoy Heaven was like asking an angel to enjoy Hell. Or something like it — for angels knew not Hell. Not like you do.

Samyaza, meanwhile, was positioning himself by the fountain, turning to face the crowd, and then calling everyone's attention by shouting, "Angels!" But, when everyone turned to him, Azazel noticed him shift his weight from one foot to the other, then fumbling with his robes. At his side, Danel was with Azazel's housemates, Baraqiel and Kokabiel, and some others that he recognized but most that he didn't. "Thank you all for coming to see us off. Once Uriel and Gabriel arrive, then we Watchers will go to Earth, and when we return, we'll have good news. We'll have made both God and all of our fellow angels proud. Everything will be like before. This I promise you."

Armoni leaned close and whispered, "He's not a very good speaker. I feel like I'm being lectured."

"Don't be rude," Dina said because if there was any eternal law in Heaven, it was excess civility.

Smirking, Azazel whispered back, "We should see his flaws as a blessing. The last perfect angel destroyed the city, remember?" Unable to stop themselves, the three angels burst into smothered laughter, turning the heads of some bystanders and feeling their judgment almost as fierce as God's.

Samyaza continued: "It won't be easy, but we have the blessing of

God, and if we are really His angels, then all there is to do is fulfill His will.”

Ta — the sound of strong wings striking the air, a quick shadow swooping by overhead, and then Uriel dropped onto one of the peaks of the fountain, though not the highest. His fiery red wings folded into him immediately after, and he raised his head — the spark of his eyes examining them all. He donned a navy cape, so long that it covered whatever he may have worn underneath, and his hair was in a crown of braids. He said nothing, lips pressed thin, face a sculpted piece of bitterness. When Gabriel swooped in and landed at a smaller peak, Uriel said nothing to him, didn’t even look at him.

Gabriel appeared as he always did — chipper. He gave a little clap and said, “I see everyone is prepared. Samyaza, are all the Watchers here?”

Samyaza turned up to him, then nodded. “Yes, archangel.”

Gabriel’s smile was toothy. “Then there’s nothing to do but leave.”

Hesitation sowed in Azazel’s gut, clawed up his throat, cutting the air away from him. He looked back at Heaven, wondering now if he should have enjoyed his last few days more, and he saw Dina, thinking, ‘Grab me, Dina. Don’t let me go. I don’t want to leave you. I chose to stay. When I asked the Lord to forgive me, I said I wanted to stay. But they’re making me leave.’ He breathed, shakily; everything would be alright; God wouldn’t let him leave if he’d never return. ‘I want to stay in Heaven forever, despite what it is now. This place. This—’ This Hell, but he knew not Hell.

“Samyaza,” Uriel’s stern voice sounded, “are you sure that everything is prepared?”

The leader of the Watchers nodded before turning to the crowd again, and though he spoke louder, his voice shook: “Watchers, it’s time for us to travel to Earth and lead the humans back to His grace. We’re blessed by the Lord Almighty to have this opportunity, not only for the salvation of man, but our own, as well. All of you — let’s leave now. Embrace one another a final time, and let us march past the gates and fly down to Earth.” There were a few cheers and a wave of applause, a few angels calling out that they would pray for them, that they hoped God would be with them.

Azazel swallowed his feelings, overflowing like too much water spilling from his hands, but he indeed took Samyaza's advice. He took a step toward Dina and wrapped his arms around the youngest angel earnestly, tightly, then kissed his cheek. "Don't cry so much while we're gone, do you hear me?"

Dina giggled then turned his head to kiss Azazel's cheek too. "I'll try."

Azazel stepped back as Armoni reached to hug their Dina, as well, and peck a few kisses onto his forehead. Meanwhile, the crowd around them started shifting, moving, like a river, toward one street, toward one of the gates. Azazel frowned, realizing that he wouldn't be sleeping in Heaven next time he allowed rest to sink in. "Come, Armoni," he said softly. "We don't want to get trampled."

"Yes," Armoni replied, patting Dina's cheek, then grabbing his bag and pulling it to sit snug between his wings. "Pray for us."

"I'll pray for you!" Dina promised as Azazel and Armoni began to walk away from him, lifting a hand to wave high, then higher, over his head. "Good luck! May all of Father's love be with you! Be safe! Don't be reckless!" His yelling was drowning in the ocean of shouting, cheering, host. "Return soon! Take care of each other!"

A delicate smile wormed along Azazel's lips as he walked alongside Armoni, who he now realized carried an embroidered cloth pouch slung over one shoulder, along with his large bag. "Oh? What's that?"

"I thought I'd bring some extra soaps and oils and jewelry and dyes."

Azazel hesitated. "Samyaza told me not to bring too much, that we should try to live as the humans do."

"Why? We're angels. Living like humans is not how Father ever intended us to live." Armoni shrugged his shoulders, and Azazel figured that was perfectly reasonable.

"I wish I had paints to bring," Azazel mumbled, stumbling a little as the crowd walked and collided with one another — competing tides and waves.

Armoni chuckled, then nudged him. "I knew you'd think that. I packed the dyes for you. Maybe you should teach the humans how to paint their faces while we're with them."

“For me?” But Azazel shrouded his bashful, grateful smiling with a laugh. “And no. I’m sure they’ve already figured it out.”

Up ahead, leading, Samyaza passed the pearled gates and the road beneath was soon becoming stone and dirt. Through the air around him, growing thicker and thicker, he commanded, “We’ll land somewhere high, somewhere the humans don’t live, and we’ll make that place our own!” His voice shook, uncertain. Hearing it, Azazel turned back to Heaven, wishing his arms were large enough to embrace her and kiss the beautiful, painful city goodbye.

CHAPTER 7



“**A**nd you, Kokabiel — you’ll be in charge of another ten.”

Instantly, many angels made an incredulous noise, then saying, “Him?” and “I don’t trust him,” and “Samyaza, maybe you aren’t being just with assigning leadership.” Azazel couldn’t help his amusement as he sat upon a flat boulder at Armoni’s side, rummaging through his friend’s bag and internally grumbling about the quality of cosmetics the angel of virtue had brought. It made sense, of course, that Armoni didn’t have any decent body paints — Azazel knew his friend only ever painted his lips and cheeks with crushed berries and pomegranate seeds. Regardless, Azazel frowned as his earlier joy fully diminished; he’d have to find something on Earth to make dyes and paints with.

Samyaza replied sternly — “You doubt in Kokabiel, you doubt in the stars.” At this, Kokabiel wheezed a giggle, but he waved a hand seemingly in agreement, while his other fingers twiddled with one of his braids as he lay on the grass with his head on Baraqiel’s lap.

The angel of the sun, Danel, was standing beside Samyaza, at the center of the imperfect sphere of angels, all of whom had been sitting for the past hour in the stream of light dripping through a gap in the tree canopy above. “I know many of you dislike Kokabiel,” he reas-

sured, “and so do I, in fact.” There was some laughter, though Samyaza and Baraqiel both furrowed their brows. “But it could be worse. You could be under the jurisdiction of a sinner, couldn’t you?”

There was more chuckling agreement, passing over most of the two hundred, whereas Azazel breathed and finally stopped fiddling with the dyes. The Earth’s air was wet, he found, was too heavy, and it was relentless in its gulping around him. Earth — strange and overcrowded like an angel had allowed one of the gardens or orchards to grow wild in Heaven, all the trees scaling upwards unrestricted, so high they might reach the cosmos. And there was so much noise, so much buzzing and crinkling and skittering, cooing, and cawing, and rustling.

Where the Watchers had landed, it had been all pale white clumps of what they had initially thought to be clouds melting on the floor. The angels also had intended, initially, to stay there, but the chill of the mountain’s peak bashed against their bodies. And, shivering, the Watchers had traveled down the slopes of the mount until they found this sprawl of greenery, where it was much warmer. Then, they all stumbled onto a clearing, sat, and Samyaza had stood and started naming leaders who would be in charge of nine angels each.

Now that lesser angel of healing gestured Danel away and said, “I have one last angel to assign as leader.” He turned his head, looked at what appeared to be Azazel, who immediately tensed, but when Samyaza parted his lips, another name came forth: “Armoni.” At Azazel’s side, the sinner angel of virtue did not react. “You’ll be a leader.”

Instantly, there was a jolt of groans and complaints, complaints that went, “*That* sinner?” and “Samyaza, you can’t be serious.” Armoni, of course, took the insults in stride. His face remained in its perfect stoic nature, and he even raised his nose a bit, as if he were really being praised. But just as Danel began to snap, Samyaza spoke once again.

“Now,” he cut through, and he walked, circling to catch the eyes of all the other Watchers, “don’t think I’m just trying to punish you all. I thought that because Armoni has sinned, he can serve as an example to the humans of the Lord’s grace and mercy. If he’s any trouble, you can

report to me, but you're to listen to him until then." He gestured. "Remember these names: Samyaza, Araquel, Rameel, Yomiel, Tamiel, Ramiel, Danel, and Chazaquel, Baraquel, Azazel, Sariel, Barariel, and Bezaliel, Ananiel, Zaquel." Pause, to catch his breath, then: "Shamsiel, Satariel, Turiel, Kokabiel. And, finally, Armoni. These are the names of those with authority among the Watchers."

Irritably leaning back on his hands, Azazel lolled his head to the side — 'Samyaza still refuses to trust me with anything,' — but his eyes, almost immediately, widened. There was something there — a pair of dark, beady eyes, peeking out from right above the fallen trunk of a pine tree. 'An animal?' No. The top of its head had dark, curled hair — it could belong to an angel. Almost, it was *almost* an angel. 'Is it—?' A gasp nearly shot out of his mouth.

"Once we make contact with the humans," Samyaza continued, "I'll be the one to speak first." 'Human!' Azazel's thoughts shrieked. 'Human! That's a human watching us!' "From what Danel has seen, they live in twenty separate groups, though they appear to have good relations with each other." Someone asked how many humans there were. "Oh, hundreds of thousands— Azazel?"

Foot almost twisting, Azazel stumbled out into a sprint, off the boulder, toward the fallen log. He didn't reply, instead watching the human eyes flicker with terror in the quarter-second before the stranger rolled across the ground, stood, then began running as well, away from the Watchers, from Azazel. "Human!" he shouted after them. It was a very small human that may have only stood up to Azazel's waist.

"Human?!" half of the Watchers gasped, clambering and rushing, almost like a stampede.

The human didn't let this deter them. In fact, they hopped over twigs and trunks expertly, swerving between branches, the arms of the trees reaching out to catch instead those Watchers who'd attempted flying. The forestry was too dense for even half a wing to spread; the angels could only run, and Azazel was doing this, but like many of the others, he stumbled over each pebble and ran clumsily into just about every tree in the way. The small human was a smear of movement ahead, launching off every slope down the forest, moving so quick Azazel worried the angels would lose them until— perhaps an act of

God — the human's foot caught on a twig. Instantly, they catapulted forward, landed straight on their face over the grass, skidding, then wheeling.

The human rolled down the mountain, each thud of their body striking the ground accompanied by pained grunts. As the runaway flailed, Azazel lost his breath, mustering all his might to batter his feet quicker, before the child slammed into a boulder. Finally, they stopped, laying limp, almost dead, but their small body shivered; Azazel reached it just as a dull, angry groan seeped out of the person's mouth. The angel staggered, dropped to his knees, and took the human by their forearm only for the flesh against his fingers to feel shockingly delicate. Redness, Azazel saw — beginning to gush from the knee of a twisted leg. "You're hurt!" Without meaning to, he recalled the crack of his wings when he'd fallen in the temple — the pounding agony of it. "Human—"

The end of a dagger; Azazel only caught the gleam of light reflecting from its stone tip for half a second — that was how quickly the human had drawn it out from a band at their long, grayed wool tunic's waist. The weapon wasn't large, barely longer than the hand that gripped it, and it was mere thin slab of wood and obsidian, sharpened to barely more than bluntness. Even still — it was a dagger, and Azazel had never been threatened like this before; what was he supposed to do?

"Stay back," the human hissed, teeth bared. "Stay back, you god-damned beasts."

"God... damned?" Azazel's words escaped hushed. "You— You must mean the demons. We're not demons, human."

"Beasts is what you are!" Their gaze flickered to all the Watchers, who were stumbling to a stop, some perched high on branches — all staring with wide-eyed fascination. "Stay away from me and my people! Go back to the fires from which you came!"

Soon, the chief of the Watchers crept forward, toward Azazel and the human, but he lingered a few steps away, his brows furrowed. "You're very small— You're a child?"

"Fuck you," the human snarled, and dozens of angels startled, scandalized.

"Please," Azazel said softly, "we're angels."

"Like *shit* you are!"

"It's true," Samyaza said, taking another step closer, before the child turned the dagger in his direction. "We're angels. We've descended from Heaven to guide you humans in the way of God. May you please lead us in the direction of your people?" His voice was shaking, nervous.

Before the human could reply, an angel nearby cried, "Samyaza, you need to heal him."

"Look at how small he is," said another Watcher. "He barely survived the fall."

"Let us help you, human," yet another called. "Stay still. We really are angels. We promise."

Azazel was feeling strange too, staring at the child and feeling worry unfurl its wings in his chest and coax him to perhaps pull the human closer, hold them tight and away from all the wickedness of the Earth. 'What's this feeling?' An impulse to care for and a natural affection. 'As if I know you, as if I've always known you.'

"What?" the human grumbled, though they finally lowered the weapon, tugging it back onto their waistband, raising a brow at all the angels fawning over them. "What are you?" A flinch followed — "Ow. My leg." They reached downward, putting a palm over the jagged break by their knee.

"Let Samyaza heal you," Azazel said, slowly loosening his grip until it was gone. "Please, human. It might hurt initially, but then it'll feel much better and you'll stop bleeding." The angel smiled, nervously, fighting a misplaced instinct to try to heal the child for himself; he'd never been a healer, and yet he craved to be capable of it now.

"Beast," the human replied, then straightened their back, their face in a deep grimace. They hesitated, but not very long, before they surrendered in an ashamed mutter "But if it's true that you can heal me, angel... Then do it."

Samyaza sighed, though in relief, before nodding and reaching for the bag he had slung over a shoulder. He shoved a hand into it, then retrieved a closed ceramic pot, as he stepped closer, getting on one knee before the child. His expression was twitching, but not in the usual

annoyance Azazel recognized. Hastily, he unscrewed the top of the circular pot, then tilted it, letting some dribbles of water fall to pool over his palm. He muttered the usual incantations, rousing the liquid from its sleep.

When Samyaza brought his hand closer, the child visibly clenched their teeth. Water spotted onto the bleeding, bony knee, and soon enough, the skin began to sew itself together, yanking the joint back into its rightful place. At this, the child cried out, jerking their body, as the healing began to do away with the spilled blood, making it steam off their very clothes. Azazel couldn't help but think, 'This child is so terribly skinny.' Their face was thin, their wrists were thin. 'Why is that?'

But as if reading the angel's mind, the human lifted their gaze, warily, quiet for some seconds, wallowing in the pain of recovery. "I—" Their voice was brittle, obligated at every syllable. "I came up the mountain looking for food. Sometimes, there are foxes around here, and I'm good at catching them. But I heard chirping, like birds, and I traveled up further than I usually go... And I saw all of you things."

Azazel asked, "Where are the other humans?"

The child padded their fingers to where the injury had been and where only damp skin now remained. "I can take you to them, but only because you might be angels. My grandmother always said that demons can't heal." Groaning, the human turned over, wobbling rising to their feet.

"Thank you," Samyaza said before standing back up as well, closing the water jug, then slipping it back into his bag.

The voice of Kokabiel, who was perched on a branch with Baraqiel, rang out, "Child, child!" The child turned their head. "What is your name, child?"

"Kokabiel," Danel, who was on some other tree, snapped, "be quiet."

"He only asked his name," Baraqiel defended his friend.

Kokabiel hacked. "Yes, only his name. We need to remember him."

"I'm not a *him*," the child snorted, as they brushed dirt off their tunic.

"What? What did he say?" asked one angel to another.

“He said he is not a *him*. ”

Then, all the Watchers began speaking over one another:

“What does that mean?”

“Is he not a human?”

“Of course he is a human.”

“He said he is not a *him*. ”

“Maybe he is a woman?”

“A what?”

“Woman,” Samyaza repeated, crossing his arms over his chest.

“That’s what you are, child, yes? In that case, we call you a *she*?”

The child gave Samyaza a disgruntled, bewildered look, as if this answer were wrong too.

“Are you a woman?” Azazel asked, moving to stand, as well.

“Are *you*?” the child laughed up at him, but when Azazel blinked, confused, they twisted around and began walking. “Hurry. If the sun sets, I’ll have trouble finding my way back.”

Samyaza glanced at Azazel, for a moment, before he followed close behind the leading human, asking, “How far away are your... people?”

“Far,” was the brisk reply.

The angels marched behind; there was hardly anything to note except that. They had to do it slowly, because the human was small and angels were all mostly tall, long-legged, meaning they had to drag their feet through the unruly grass, trying to avoid stepping on any of the million creatures skittering around the ground. Hopping over a log, Azazel realized that he was walking beside Samyaza. He didn’t know why that embarrassed him, but it did, and he looked away, staring at all the forestry instead, at the birds. His stomach was twisting, tightening; it clenched when he caught sight of Armoni, moving along further behind. They stared at one another but didn’t say anything. No one, really, was speaking, except for some whispers.

The trees began to hold better distance from one another, and the ground came flatter, and the sun — at an angle barely above the horizon — freely streamed down onto all of them. It was as they stepped out of the woods of the mountain that the child finally spoke again. “My name is Naamah. Remember it, in case any of the elders asks who to thank for bringing you to our village.”

“Naamah,” Azazel repeated. “That’s a very nice name.” The child didn’t reply.

Ahead, they saw two things of interest. The first was a river — that made its way up into another batch of forestry on the lower mountain — and the second was a group of homes huddled together, interconnected by dirt pathways between tall grass, a shade more like hay than the green of the pines behind them. The circular homes were constructed of a clay and mud mixture — Azazel had seen some buildings not unlike this in Heaven but much nicer — with a muted redness to them, as if the sun had melted onto their bodies. Upholding those bodies were wooden skeletons — long slabs that protruded out from the walls jaggedly, up by the flat roofs, which appeared to be made from logs, as well, and straw. And there were several hundred of these buildings, all densely packed.

‘The humans are small,’ Azazel realized; it wasn’t only the child. He saw many of them outside, moving, doing things — in a way like angels, bustling about, having duties. Azazel wasn’t sure why that little fact made him flush; humans had just been an idea before, but now they were here, breathing, sweating, speaking.

They were also all in desperate need of a washing; they smelled, thickly and heavily. Their earthly stink was almost like a fog rushing at Azazel, who crinkled his nose but continued onward anyway. It was as if a faraway, blurry portrait were coming into view; his eyes darted to the flimsy tunics, made of cotton or animal skins, that draped off the humans. Their mouths were overbrimming with chipped, unaligned teeth, and their skin was exceedingly imperfect; angels had all sorts of specs and freckles, but they were like constellations on their bodies, begging to be traced with a finger, while Azazel thought these humans looked as if they’d been poked and dotted with a paint brush clumsily. There were small slashes of lighter skin, scars, on them, and their hair was frayed, discolored on some. Their features were awkward, their bodies uneven — the angel couldn’t help but be made horrifically aware of his own flesh.

Azazel thought, ‘They’re like us, but...’

‘Worse,’ Samyaza thought.

The humans who were out in the sun saw them, and they drew

breaths, nudged and pointed for those beside them, and a few stumbled into their homes, others shouted for company. Many were suddenly rushing into a certain large hut, hurrying for the attention of a certain man, who was dragged out by two younger men, who gripped him by the arms and torso. Both men were afflicted with hair on the lower half of their faces and moved slowly, as all the humans were suddenly doing. Azazel wondered if the two hundred Watchers looked horrifically intimidating, marching in a flood toward the village.

Naamah called out “Enoch! These angels were up on the mountain. They asked for me to lead them here.”

It seemed Enoch was the one who leaned on the men. Almost, Azazel flinched at the sight of him — wrinkles, as if flesh were dribbling down his very bones. His eyes were almost colorless, hazed, and when they blinked, the angel realized that they were unseeing. “Angels?” came a croak from him, through the mangle of white hair on the lower half of his face, hanging down his chin as if from a scalp.

Samyaza felt all the Watchers turn their gaze to his back, burning holes into it, and he swallowed. “Greetings.” He took a step forward, reaching for his bag again. Internally, he was blessing the water; he knew already what he must do. “We come with the blessing of God.” Pausing, Samyaza saw the crowd building all around them, and that there was a staggering amount of tiny humans and melting folk — children and the elderly — hidden among the more normal-seeming people. “We have come to guide you back to His grace. For, you see, the Lord has not abandoned you, and we have faith that you are worthy of eternal paradise with Him.”

Silence, none of the ecstatic fervor that the leader of the Watchers had anticipated. Instead, the humans exchanged curious looks, some chuckles, a few distant coughs. And, worse still, a shrill wail that made Samyaza jump — the same as every other angel — before he saw that it belonged to one of the tiny humans that a person held. A woman, possibly, but Samyaza wasn’t sure. Clearing his throat, he heard the sounds of cattle, somewhere — low, long calls — interjecting between his every word:

“We hope to live among you and teach you the ways of goodness and worship—”

“How do we know,” spoke the elderly Enoch, looking at Samyaza’s feet, “that you are angels and not demons?”

“Come forward,” the lesser angel of healing said, softer. “I can see your eyes are damaged. Allow me to heal your blindness.” Just as a ripple of doubt, confusion, made its clamor over the humans, Samyaza added, “Do not be afraid.”

CHAPTER 8



The first sunset was a horror. Azazel watched his shadow grow from puddle into stream, stretching further and further away from him until it began seeping into the pool of dark spreading from the east. Meanwhile, the western horizon was red-pink as if blood-water mixture and like a blessed halo of the sun sinking into the jungled mountain range. The angel watched it from his uncomfortable seat on the ground, eyes tired, legs crossed — the same place where he'd been imprisoned for hours, though hours felt different on Earth, felt wrong.

Everything — his breaths, the crunch of dry dirt beneath his feet — was quicker.

“There are twenty tribes,” Enoch was murmuring to all the angels. “Some stay in place, others follow the herds and take their houses with them.” Loosely, he gestured to his community nestled at the feet of the mountain, houses huddled like they were trying to share whispers. “There used to be more tribes, and then there were fewer, but now we’ve been twenty for a hundred years since what happened to the last tribe.” All the angels were sitting on the ground, arranged so those that Samyaza had bestowed leadership upon were lined at the front, including Armoni. To the left, there was an earthly stench — manure and musk — as well as a short fence made of clay, where the bleats of

goats kept skittering from. Before them — Enoch's spherical hut of a home stood, whereas the elderly man himself sat against it, atop a wooden bench so simple it may have been a table.

"What happened to the last tribe?" Samyaza asked, sitting by the feet of the elder.

"Drought," replied Enoch simply, but then he laughed at the blinking confusion of the angels. "That's when there's no water."

"There's a river right there," argued Danel at Samyaza's side.

"It wasn't that they had nothing to drink," replied the old man patiently. "No rain fell for over a year on their land. Many started to die after their crops failed, and the rest went on to disperse among the other tribes and have lost their identity now." He lifted his gaze, newly seeing. "You said the Lord sent you, is that right?"

"Yes," answered Samyaza. "Though it was really us that asked permission to come to Earth."

Azazel stretched his legs, put his hands flat on the ground behind him, and he craned his neck, turning his face upwards. The coming night sky wasn't so interesting, the hints of it disentangling from the pinks and yellows of day-ending; the dark was a reflection of the cosmos but incomplete, like it'd been cut up into a jigsaw and he only held one piece. Blinking, he lolled his head to a shoulder, his gaze falling with it, to stare at the nearby houses, the horizon, the mountain, and the breeze walking along by.

Earlier, humans had crowded around, tried to speak to all the angels at once, tried even to reach for them, and even more humans had been drawn out from their homes, creating a sea that mammoth-ed the two hundred Watchers until Enoch had shouted for his sons to expel the couple thousand away to any other part of their settlement.

Occasionally, some humans passed by, often carrying objects or children, pretending not to stare but their gazes would always drift over to them, then dart away. They'd scurry away hurriedly afterward, as if the angels would lunge and maul them for looking. All Azazel could do was sigh, then blink when he noticed a small, familiar silhouette nearby, lugging a large clay pitcher in their small arms. Without thinking, Azazel glanced at Enoch, who was pointing in the opposite direction and describing how yet another tribe had fallen. Azazel quietly moved

onto his knees, thinking that he wouldn't instigate a stampede this time, and just about crawled away as inconspicuously as manageable. Within only some seconds, he dipped behind one of the clay walls of the goat stable.

The child wasn't far, so Azazel shuffled lowly a few steps, then stood to hurry and make his way over as silently as he'd escaped Enoch's endless descriptions of humanity to the wide-eyed angels. 'But I hate sitting around listening,' Azazel thought with a little huff. 'If this trip to Earth is going to be pure lecturing, I may as well still be in Heaven.' And so when he came up to the child from behind, he smiled bright, whispering, "Naamah. That was your name, wasn't it?" The child instantly stopped, twisted their head back with a bewildered scrunch of their face, a second before hoisting the tall pitcher onto a shoulder with an ease that said it was empty. "I'm happy to see you again so that I can give you my name too. I'm Azazel."

Naamah stared at him in the darkness, then got on the tips of their toes to raise their body diagonally and look past Azazel. Then, the child chuckled, turned around, and began walking again. "I'm going for water to bring back to my great-grandmother."

"From the river?" Azazel followed nonetheless, keeping his head low as if that'd bring him down to the height of humans. "I can help." He tried reaching for the pitcher, but the child ducked out of Azazel's reach, then skittered along faster, cutting through the impenetrable, spreading night. "Oh, well if you want to carry it, that's alright too." The sharp, high-pitched wail of something, 'perhaps an animal,' turned Azazel's head, but what he saw was an adult, bouncing a tiny human in their arms. "Oh, that's an infant." He'd seen them earlier and heard of how animals, and humans, were born small.

"Why are you following me?" Naamah opened their mouth in a wide yawn, reinforcing the disinterest in their tone. "Shouldn't you be listening to Enoch with all the other angels? Aren't you one of their leaders?"

"Hm, me? No, not at all." Azazel glanced over his shoulder at the angels that were growing distant, growing smaller, then looked forward again, searching for where moonlight glimmered off a blue, crystalline snake of a body — a river. "In fact, Samyaza — the one who healed you

— is the chief of us Watcher angels, and he didn't choose me to be a leader because I think he dislikes me very much." Gossip came too instinctively to him. "But he elected my friend Armoni. You see, some angels in Heaven—"

"Heaven," Naamah repeated, brisk. "What is that?" They stepped a little ahead again, turned around, and began walking backward, staring up at the angel.

"Oh." Azazel hesitated, opening his mouth, then closing it again, tangled words catching on his tongue, not coming apart to say anything. What was he supposed to say? "It's where I live." That was true; he had woken from a bed there many hours ago. "I was," a hand raising, pointing at the stars, "born there, from God, and then I fell onto the stars, and an angel woke me. Then, I was taken to Heaven, the city of angels."

"You were born? You have a mother?"

Now, it was Azazel's turn to be perplexed. "What's a mother?"

The child snorted, the ends of their lips twitching. "The one who gave birth to you. Carried you, pushed you out of her body, takes care of you."

"God birthed me," Azazel replied, "so I suppose God is my mother. But we call Him Father in Heaven."

"We call the other parent the father."

"Other parent?"

Naamah's eyes were beginning to narrow, and when they spun around, they swayed, gaining a little skip to their steps. "So there's a city for the angels?"

"Yes." Azazel smiled, breathing out the earthy, dense air in relief to return to something easy to comprehend — Heaven, rather than motherhood. "It's very nice there. The trees always drop fruit, and the homes are beautiful colors," 'though less so now,' "and some buildings are so tall that they'd cut through those clouds above. The rivers are always just warm enough. The breeze is always pleasant."

"Always?"

"Yes," replied the angel, catching a fallen tree in the distance, still and unturning. 'How I hated Heaven,' and yet, 'I miss it already.' Heaven, who had taken good care of him; 'Heaven, my mother.' He

lingered on that thought for a moment, then — ‘I never saw God birth me.’ Maybe it was the city that had, had pushed him out of her body, as Naamah had said. He licked his lips, nibbled on them, and softly added, “Heaven has always been there, too. Heaven is a city of always, I think.” He knew of angels who’d built the first roads and set the first buildings, but the land itself, he was sure, had always been there, tucked between the stars and whatever had existed before the Earth, and Heaven would remain there forever.

“Hm. Sounds quite boring to me.”

Azazel frowned, the buzz and hum of the forest crawling into his ears, followed by the rush of water as they approached the river that crept down the mountain. The sprawl of pine trees shrouded how far high the river might scale, whereas plentiful cattails boarded the portion nearest to them. “Heaven is very nice.” Or it had been. “We’re always happy.”

“Always.” Naamah laughed, hacking, and Azazel found himself wishing he’d simply stayed with the others. He was always doing things he shouldn’t, for no good reason — and maybe he was a bad angel, after all. “I want to know how the other angel made Enoch see again.” With this, they reached the riverbank, and the child dropped onto a crouch over wet pebbles. “Did he do it through the power of God?”

“All power comes from God.” Azazel lowered himself down to where the child was, reaching for the pitcher, taking it simply, feeling its dry composition against his palms. “In a sense, then, yes. It was through God, but God is everywhere.” God is everywhere but in some places more than others — in Heaven, in the sea, in the flowers, but not in flesh. In angels more than man. “Samyaza incants the water, and the water stirs, and it heals.”

The child made a noise, not of confusion but irritation, perhaps irritation at confusion. “My mother—” Exhaling harshly, then putting their arms over their knees, hands hanging. “She told me the first humans were punished by God, and that’s why we suffer.”

“God is forgiving,” Azazel reassured, then moved to dip the pitcher into the ice-cool water, letting it fill. “I once acted against the Lord, too, but He forgave me. He allowed me to stay in Heaven with all the other angels, despite what I’d done.” ‘Don’t remember,’ he urged himself.

‘Don’t remember how you begged Him for His love.’ “He is very kind. I think He’ll forgive you all, as well, and you’ll be welcomed into Heaven.” He forced a smile, then lifted the pot and stood, settled it on a hip. “I have a nice house. When you go there, I’d love to make you some coffee in my kitchen.”

Naamah didn’t move, then replied stiffly, “Check if any animals got into the pot.”

“Hm?” Azazel brought the pitcher before himself, looked into its mouth, then jolted at the spindly, green insect skittering on the surface. Carefully, he tried scooping it with his hands; the water was too cold and unwelcoming.

The child once again spoke: “So that angel who hates you can make the blind see, and what about you? Can you cure anything?”

“Well, we can all heal, but some of us are better at it than others. Angels are suited for different things.” Azazel huffed as the tiny creature continued to scurry through his fingers.

After a second’s pause, Naamah asked, “Are any angels good at killing things?” Azazel lifted his face at the question, but as he did so, the insect hopped out of the pot itself to fall onto the rocks. Each of its long legs clamored along the shore, heading toward the rush of water. Just as it had passed the final cattail, Naamah lifted a stone and brought it down on the creature with a smash and wet splatter.

Azazel felt his heart lunge up into his throat and stay lodged there, his eyes widening in a rupture of horror. His muscles tensed, his very mind shocked into a shrivel of itself at the sight. This angel had never known death, not like this. Heaven was life, always life.

Naamah ground the rock, and the legs of the insect twitched in a sad plea against the cruelty. “I ask because the hunters struggle to find food. Maybe you should help them kill things.” Abandoning the weapon, the child swung their body up to stand, brushed off their tunic.

Teeth dug into his bottom lip, Azazel still looked to the once-frightened, murdered creature. “Yes... I can do that.” He didn’t know what else to say to a killer; angels didn’t kill, only God killed. “You... said you had a mother?” Azazel tried to soothe away the manner in which he’d stiffened, in which he’d frozen inside, by smiling weakly.

"We angels have brothers too. It's beautiful, I think, how we're similar."

"My parents are dead," Naamah responded casually, not looking at the angel. "They died in the last harvest from fever. It's a shame—" Azazel breathed shakily "—that you angels didn't come just a bit sooner. You could have saved them, I imagine. It's a shame. Shame, shame, shame."

The angel stared, but any of the words caught in his throat didn't have the time to liberate. Sharply, there were calls of his name, the distinct tone of Samyaza's annoyance, and the sighing Azazel turned from the river to catch the angel of his nightmares advancing toward them. His lips were pressed finely together, and when Samyaza moved, it was unnaturally rigid. "Azazel!" he snapped again.

Before Azazel could reply, the child reached and snatched back their jug, laughing. "Goodbye!" They twisted and scampered off into the night, toward the huts, and leaving Azazel there without defense or distraction. For as long as he could — he watched Naamah leave, he avoided meeting Samyaza's eyes, wondering if he might conjure up something both truthful and excusatory for escaping duty, but slowly, he faced the angel before him.

"Samyaza," Azazel uttered.

His stare was cold. "You'll be staying here."

"Here?"

"In Enoch's tribe. I've assigned each leader of the Watchers a tribe, so each will have ten angels to watch over their group of humans." Samyaza moved closer, so smooth he may have been gliding. "Because it's dark now, we'll wait until the sun returns, and when it does, each leader will leave with their angels. I'll be staying here with Enoch, and so will you."

Initially, Azazel saw no issue with this, beyond the fact that he'd be close to Samyaza, but despite everything, he didn't really dislike him enough to be bothered by living in proximity to each other. Naamah was wrong; it wasn't hate between them, not quite. They were housemates, weren't enemies. In fact, Azazel found their bickering to be unique in that they never quite promised to never speak again; Samyaza had, after all, brought Azazel to Earth. However, Azazel soon remem-

bered who the other leaders were, and with his body straightening, his eyebrows furrowing, he said, "You're sending Armoni away, aren't you?"

"There's a city far to the east. Enoch says the leader of the tribe is an elder who is trapped in bed from age, and Armoni will be charged with caring for him. I think that'll satisfy the Watchers under his jurisdiction, as you know they didn't want to follow the orders of a sinner. An easy concession to make."

"You're always," Azazel responded, lowly, "making concessions." Not far from Samyaza's head, the moon was rising, and Azazel realized that night had come, and all the stars had come, eyed these two angels. Two angels, two that Azazel had just thought didn't sincerely hate one another. He laughed, stepped away, shaking his head, throwing up his hands, wanting to shove Samyaza but knowing this would just make it all true — sinners were secretly violent, they were just waiting for an excuse to hurt, they were irrational, immature. "You—" It was the only word, it seemed, safe enough to muster. Samyaza stared at him, but the grim look was nothing new, had been the same expression he'd given Azazel since he walked to him, since the war, since *before* the war. 'What did I,' Azazel wanted to shout at him, 'ever do to you?'

Samyaza replied, "You wouldn't know about concessions, Azazel. You can't listen to anyone, won't listen to me or even this human who wanted us angels to understand his people. Did you think I didn't see you?" Azazel idly knocked a pebble with his sandal, watched the rock lunge toward the water then be carnivored by it. "So, tell me now, why did you run off like that? Will you blame the child?"

Because he was an angel, Azazel couldn't lie. "I was," an annoyed grunt, "tired, sitting there. I wanted to move, and I didn't find Enoch's talk very interesting."

"You have no interest in the humans we'll be living among for, possibly, a long time?"

"I never had an interest in coming here!" Azazel hadn't meant to yell, and instantly, he regretted it, cringing as if in pain. He looked to the huts, noticed faint light streaming through gaps in the walls and through the walkways; no house, seemingly, had a door. "I wanted to stay in Heaven."

Samyaza stepped closer, and he leaned his face to his, voice falling to a hissing whisper. “Why don’t you want to work for Heaven to forgive you for what you’ve done?”

“Even God’s forgiveness was not enough for you angels.” Azazel, painfully, turned his gaze back to Samyaza’s. “Did you know your friend Danel was going around, telling angels that he wanted us sinners rounded up and put in a corner of Heaven where they wouldn’t have to see us? Would you have granted him that concession, Samyaza? Would you never want to see me again?” Samayaza’s expression flickered, he swallowed, and a passing spirit in his eyes told Azazel that he hadn’t been meant to know this.

“That won’t happen. It *can’t* happen now.” Azazel looked at him wildly, almost gasping at whatever those words seemed to be implying. “Don’t talk about that now. We can’t argue on the first night on Earth. Come with me back to Enoch’s home. We’ll all be sleeping there.” He inched away and gave him his back, began walking. “And you should bid farewell to Armoni.”

Azazel frowned, felt as if all his face was drooping sadly with it. “I don’t like it here,” he said, not sure why, but he began to follow — slow, but he did. “The child told me its parents died recently. And then the child killed an insect in front of me.”

“There’s a lot of work to do — teaching these humans to worship God and abandon sin.”

“I don’t like it here,” Azazel said again, reaching the side of Samyaza. ‘But, I often didn’t like Heaven much either.’ He brought his hands together and fiddled with his fingers, picking at his nails. There was buzzing, then croaks, then chirping, and the noise of goats from before — the blaring Earth, neverending in its noise. When voices reached them, he didn’t consider them any more than he did the rustling of the nearby jungled mountain, but they grew more pitched, more harrowed. At this, he sensed Samyaza stop, stretch an arm over Azazel’s chest to halt him, and they turned their heads together.

Two humans were screaming at each other, illuminated by a torch one of them held, though the jagged nature of the wood lent to believing it’d been grabbed from a fire within the home, then taken outside so the pair could see their arguing faces. One of the humans

carried overgrown hair on the lower half of his face, and the other human carried a necklace of bone pieces over her breasts — a man and a woman, but the angels couldn't quite tell the difference yet. Occasionally, either human lifted a hand, like they were going to strike each other, but they never did. And Azazel and Samyaza simply watched them for a while, then glanced at each other, curiously.

The couple exchanged some words of payment and sex and children, but the angels couldn't understand and soon walked away again.

CHAPTER 9



It took days of walking eastward beneath a blazing, too-amorous sun, but eventually, ten Watchers arrived at the feet of another settlement, embraced by tall, but not towering, stone walls. What the angels encountered first was fright, some humans scurrying toward the wide gape of the entrance into the city. Next, taller, burlier people hurried out, toward the angels, gripping wooden sticks sharpened to points. The angels, befuddled, looked amongst each other, not perceiving this at all to be a threat, before Armoni, angel of virtue, stepped forward. He pulled his curled golden hair over a shoulder, then dipped forward into a low bow, as if to expose the back of his throat and leave it to decapitation. At this, the humans asked why these strangers had come.

Armoni, still bowed, replied that they were only ten angels, and they would like to speak with the chief of the city.

Some hesitance, but a man called out for all the Watchers to remain where they were before gesturing for Armoni to follow him and two other men. The angel straightened, nodded, and he followed without a word through the wide opening embedded into the walls and onto a path of, oddly, cobblestone. A sliver of shadow passed over his head, then the sun bared down once more and buildings of stone came into view, doorless like those of Enoch's tribe, though some entryways were

painted and engraved in excess, some guarded by tall animal figurines. The buildings were also large in width, white-painted walls muraled with hexagonal red patterns and creatures that looked somewhere between humanoid and animal, almost all with claws, tails, and cruel, twisted faces. Armoni, too, saw a flat, rock flooring between a cluster of the tallest buildings; animal skins were draped on that floor, pots and pans and raw ingredients laying haphazardly, likely dropped when all the residents of the city ran to hide at the first hint of visitors.

Sighing, Armoni caught two humans peering out from their doorway, but at eye contact, they receded.

The humans led him to the largest home, right before the market, and had him wait at the doorway as a single man entered, shouting a name, but he was gone only a moment. In half a minute, he'd returned with a wave of his hand to the angel, a gesture to follow, and Armoni obediently did. What greeted him was nothing like Heaven's extravagance, but it immediately displayed comfort, not at all like the village of Enoch.

'In fact,' Armoni mused to himself, 'this isn't a village at all.' He'd found Enoch's community to be unorganized and, frankly, dirty, and what he saw in this home was a clean stone ground, more strange muraled walls, and plenty of animal skins — at his feet, there was a great, gray feline with saber-teeth. There were also two lofted mats by a low obsidian table, where a young woman was standing, nervous hands clasped by her belly. When she saw the angel, her eyes widened, but her nervous demeanor didn't break. Wordlessly, she pointed her thin fingers to one of the mats, then sat at the opposite one.

Armoni glanced back to the man who'd led him in, but when he said nothing, the angel walked over to sit where indicated; he heard the shuffles of the man leave behind him. He maintained his iron-colored eyes on the woman, noticed a winged, black bead of an insect atop her head. And he found her unsightly immediately; when her lips pulled back, a missing canine was revealed, and she had a broken nose, as well as a face spotted with the holes of a disease's memory. She hid oak-brown hair beneath a wool scarf that fell to her eyebrows and must've nudged at her vision.

"Welcome," the woman said warily, "angel."

“Are you the chief of this city?” Armoni almost joked if she was one of the chief princes of the humans but restrained himself, putting his hands on his lap.

“Chief? No. No, no.” She shook her head more than necessary and adjusted her weight. “I’m his great-great-granddaughter.”

“Then why did they bring me to you?”

“He’s very old, and I take care of him.” She seemed hasty with words, eager to be quiet. “But why have you come here?”

Armoni wasn’t incredibly sure of the answer. “The Lord sent us to guide you humans back to Him by teaching you of goodness and of sin.” He craned his head around, examining everything in the room, catching a clay pitcher and a statue in the shape of an oversized sloth. “But I see God has blessed your people greatly, compared to those of Enoch’s tribe, so maybe there isn’t anything to teach you.”

“Goodness....? Sin?” Her brow furrowed, her bottom lip wobbled, but not in sadness — mere conflicted feelings. “I should ask my grandfather what he thinks of this. His name is Adam.” Armoni immediately turned back to her, curiously, but he knew it was probably not the Adam he knew of — the first man. He, like everyone, had been told he was long dead. “I’ll tell him about you. How long will you angels be here?”

“That’s for God to decide,” Armoni replied, then added snidely, “but I suppose everything is.”

The woman didn’t seem to take this any particular way — no confusion, no fascination, no humor — as she rose to stand, murmured that she’d return, then crossed the room only to turn a corner by the entrance. At this, Armoni let himself look around again, searching for anything of interest, and found a broad opening in the wall. A window, divided vertically by a pillar of wood through the middle. Through it, he could see into a courtyard, though it had a stone ground and a few scattered, potted plants and some red chili peppers hanging from ceiling beams.

When the woman returned, she strayed far and called, “I forgot to tell you my name. It’s Miriam.” It was a pleasant word, though it lacked the angelic touch that Armoni liked in his own name. “But you

can go speak to my great-great-grandfather now. I've explained everything to him, and tomorrow, you should speak with my oldest brothers; they're out today, but they'll be back soon, I hope. They'll be more help to you."

"Why is that?"

"Because they're men," she replied simply. "And I'm just a poor girl taking care of her elderly great-great-grandfather." Before Armoni could reply, she asked, "Would you like anything to drink?"

Armoni blinked, then shook his head. "I doubt I'll have a taste for your human drinks." He hummed, trying to avoid the faint frown on her thin lips. "You said Elder Adam is awake?" He reached to twirl some of the hair he had still over one shoulder, wondering if he should braid it again before deciding that he would.

Hesitance, then "Yes. He's right at the end of the hall here."

"I'll go speak to him then." He rose to his feet, slow, then smoothing down his tunic, then reaching to run his fingers through the golden curls he still had cascaded over a shoulder. As he did so, he felt the gaze of the woman on him, examining him, and it almost made him scowl. Lowly, he said, "If you could, I'd like it if you prepared a place for my angels to sleep."

"I'll see what I can do." And Armoni began walking, toward her, then brushing past her, moving a few arm-widths away until the woman, suddenly, added, "You're very beautiful—" Her own breath hitching cut her off; she hadn't meant to say that, had obviously blurted out what was on her mind in error. "Oh, I don't mean that in a strange way. It's only that—" Armoni stopped, turned, and stared, his eyes empty, his lips betraying nothing, as the great-great-granddaughter shifted, grimacing almost. "I didn't think the Lord's angels were so... nice to look at. You're as beautiful as a woman. You could be the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

"It wouldn't make sense for Him to make His angels anything but beautiful, would it?" Armoni realized he didn't like her, before realizing maybe he didn't like these humans at all.

"I suppose you're right." Her voice dribbled with some kind of anxiety, which Armoni didn't understand. Had she hoped for a better

response? It was a weird comment to make; Armoni was almost offended by it; ‘How dare she say I have the beauty of a woman, rather than an angel?’ “I’ll be here.” She gestured to where she’d been sitting before. “My grandfather is in the room on the left.”

Without responding, Armoni headed down a corridor that had the murals that kept calling his attention, and now that he was closer, he noticed that the beastly creatures depicted seemed non-malicious, but he couldn’t quite place why that was so. He reached a red curtain on the left wall that he tugged to the side. Taking a breath beforehand, he moved past the doorway, allowing the cloth to drape back into place behind him.

It was quite a sight, even in the darkness; the large bed was surrounded by flora — geraniums, and lilacs, blue lotuses, and, most significantly, white tulips — as if the elder who laid upon it were already dead. The headboard was wooden but elaborately intersected with tree roots, which themselves carried a few dried sunflowers. Over his body, there was a coarse cloth, though dyed in colorful rows and embroidered with earthly decals in between simple dashed lines. The room had two stone tables, the one closest to the bed holding a clay bowl of water and another bowl stuffed with purple figs. And, there was a sill right by the bed — perhaps a window above it but it was obscured by a draped sheet — where two pots were set, one tending to a sleepy black pepper plant and the other tending to a saffron crocus plant with bloomed, chipper flowers.

Elder Adam grunted before turning his head. His hair was long, curled weakly, white as a cloud. His brown-bronze skin was so wrinkled that its features could hardly be seen; Armoni had difficulty telling if his eyes were hazel or green. Many of his teeth were missing, and his bones almost protruded out from his skin as if they wished to escape; his thinness made him resemble a pile of twigs. When he shifted, there were cracks along his spine, as if it had never been used, or as if it had been used too many times now, and it was begging, crying, to snap a final time.

“You,” came the scratch of a voice. “Armoni is your name?”

“That it is.” Armoni approached, stopped; there was a pungent, rotting odor that lifted from Adam’s body and rushed to the angel’s

face. It was so loud, so dense, and so foul, he couldn't help but grimace. "Elder... Adam... is it?"

"Yes. If I could move from this bed, I would greet you more politely, angel." Elder Adam leaned back once more, his legs twitching some. "But I have been here for days, on this bed."

"You need a bath," said Armoni, plainly.

Adam chuckled, the sound crinkling as it left his dried lips. "That I do. My great-great-granddaughter — she can't take good care of me. She's young, doesn't know yet that other people can feel."

"I can wash you." Armoni went for the bowl of water he'd seen on one of the tables. He looked inside, saw that it was half empty with water, but reasoned that would be enough. "Please tell me if anything hurts." Armoni still had his large bag slung over a shoulder, and he touched it as he sat upon the edge of the bed, then rummaged through his things. He retrieved a pumice stone and some argan oil, before letting his bag flop to the floor. "Do you need assistance removing your clothes?"

Adam wore no more than a linen tunic, so plain and thin you could've mistaken it for his skin. "I do."

Armoni nodded, standing back up to set the stone and oil by the clay bowl of water. He reached for the man, gripped him along the torso very gently, as if he were glass, then dragged him up to sit. He pulled the covers downward, exposing Adam up to his bare feet, and then he took the long tunic, began dragging it until he reached the man's rump. Armoni snaked one arm around Adam's torso again, lifted him just an inch, and managed to pull the tunic up to his waist. Then, he returned both hands to the hem, pulled it off over the head of the man.

'What a body,' Armoni thought, partly bewildered by a human man's naked flesh. 'A pitiful body.' Perhaps a younger, healthier man had a nicer form to see, but Armoni hadn't the slightest clue, and so he felt pity. Pity for the humans and their imperfect bodies and weaknesses and their slow march toward death. 'Is that why you have sent me here, Father? To be grateful? To see how blessed I am that you've forgiven me for my sins? To sing and worship because I'm not damned to a life like these humans live?' He cast aside the tunic, then took the

oil and sat at the side of Adam. Dribbling the argan onto a hand, he took the elderly man's wrist and, tenderly, began massaging the slick substance down his arm.

"Your hands are warm," said Adam, his voice croaky and weak. "I've never been familiar with true angels. I only ever saw some from afar."

"You must be mistaken; angels haven't interacted with humans since your time in Eden." Armoni had read that in one of the monuments. Perhaps surprisingly, the expulsion of man from Eden hadn't been of great importance to the vast majority of angels; Heaven hadn't even realized it occurred until many decades after the fact. When it was finally added to their histories, it was as a mere footnote.

"You're the one that's mistaken," Adam chuckled. "When Adam of Eden died, an angel was there."

Armoni blinked, not having known this. "You were there at the death of Adam?"

"He lived over nine hundred years, and it really hasn't been that long since his death.

Armoni hummed, moving to slather the elderly man's other arm. "How old are you?"

"Could you answer that question, angel?"

Smiling a little — "I suppose not." He started working a bit quicker, going through all his limbs. "But I see you've had a good life. You have a city here with many happy people, and from what I gathered, you have many children and grandchildren. And what about a woman? The first Adam had a woman. Do you?"

"I've had many women." Armoni frowned at that. "I was cruel to my first wife, so she left one day, and I never saw her again. The second wife fell sick after our fifth child. The third died during the birth of our first child together. The fourth walked away too. The fifth brought a knife to her own throat. The sixth wife has just recently died on me."

"I am very sorry."

"I'm the one who's sorry. I didn't love them."

"Then why were you with them?"

"Us humans are not good at love. I'm sure it's difficult for you to

understand. Angels are such romantic creatures, aren't they? They don't know of greed, of hate."

"Romantic," Armoni echoed, ticking his tongue. "What do you mean by that?"

"What do I mean by romance?" Adam made a noise like it could have been a laugh, but it was a gurgle. "Well, everyone says romance is the love between man and woman. Romance is marriage."

"Then angels aren't romantic," Armoni said. "Angels do not marry, nor do we love like you humans do."

"My mistake," replied the elder but with not a touch of sincerity. "My parents told me, once, that that they did. But it could have been just a story, like those you tell children so they sleep well in your arms."

Armoni swallowed, then began oiling the rest of the man's front, even the thin, weak hair on his chest. "You're also mistaken that we don't know greed. Like you humans, we've lost our innocence. We lost it during the great war for Heaven. I'm not sure if you're familiar with that."

"I know some of it. Will you explain?"

"It's not knowledge that I think concerns humans," Armoni sighed before gently turning the man over onto his stomach. He began oiling his back, noting the dark grime stuck to it, wondering how the humans could leave this man to lay in his own stink for so long. "But... In the time of angels before man, all was well. We lived in paradise with our Father; there was nothing but love and leisure. Then, an angel spoiled his beauty, by becoming vain and greedy. He introduced disobedience and sin, thought he could replace God, and he led a war against Him — a war for Heaven. We angels cannot die, but many of us died that night." It was the only night Heaven had ever had.

"God cast the angel down from His kingdom?"

"Yes," Armoni said, not thinking much of how Elder Adam might know this. Perhaps, his ancestors had told him — maybe the Adam of Eden. "And God created man, but Satan disguised himself as a serpent and tricked the first woman, and now you humans wander this Earth, this world where Satan rules with impunity."

There were insects, somewhere, violin-ing into the air, as the elderly man was turned forward again, then pulled up to sit. Armoni breathed

in the darkness of the bedroom, thinking of how he'd stared at the moon from the Earth for the first time yesterday; Armoni could also remember once watching an angel create a moon, rolling it between his palms like clay until it sphered, and it was no perfect circle, but he delighted in its misshapen uniqueness. The angels kissed craters into the moon's sun-warmed skin, then tied it to a string around an earth. Armoni thought of the stars too, twinkling, looking down on them with curiosity even in their sleep. And there was an abyss in between, the deepest purples and blues with a creamy wave of light that Armoni, last night, even from where he'd been, could feel the soft touch of.

"How cruel this God is," said Adam.

Armoni rummaged within his ribs for the heart to argue – couldn't find it. "Let me finish washing you."

'I wish I'd held onto the moment I saw the moon yesterday a little tighter. Azazel was sitting next to me against the wall of Enoch's hut, sharing a blanket with me. Azazel gestured at the night leaking through the window, then rested his head on my shoulder. He slept like that.' The angel scrubbed the elder with water and the stone everywhere, gentle so that his skin would not tear. 'Poor humans, wilting with age, crinkling like dried flowers.' The sounds of nature continued to creep in; there was a bird's call nearby, a lonely sparrow seeking its lover.

"When," spoke the man, but Armoni continued listening to the hum of life, "He abandoned us," there were the cries of an infant, somewhere, "it was when Cain, the son of Adam, killed his brother Abel."

Armoni had heard this story; he hadn't thought anything of it.

"Then, the banished Cain went east to the Land of Nod, settled here. Adam and Eve continued having hundreds of children until they both died. But the last time the Lord ever spoke to us was on that day of the murder. I was not there, I don't know what He might have said. I wonder, every night, if He told Cain that He no longer loved us, and that we should be ashamed, that us humans will suffer for all of eternity."

The angel of virtue finished bathing him, at last, but made no move to put his things away. He thought for a moment, about what he knew

of Cain and Abel, and then he asked, quietly, “Did Cain have children?”

“This city,” Adam said.

“This city?”

“We are all descendants of Cain.”

Armoni’s blood became ice, became sharp.

“But, really, you are lucky to be here. The demons do not attack us. They much prefer killing the descendants of Seth.”

CHAPTER 10



The first days became the first weeks.

And it was not awful. In fact, if Azazel had to count every awful thing of Earth, he would end at a modest number, rather than an awe-inspiring one, and he was definitely not miserable. The morning had come, again, as it had been doing, and the birds were chipping a song; from the plain cotton hammock he'd been gifted, Azazel listened and stared out the doorway of the medium-sized hut. Cotton balls overpopulated the blue sky like sheep roaming along a lake, tempting the angel to stretch his wings and fly upward, halfway to Heaven, but not enough to have him take the leap. He was quite content to lay where he was, swinging, sleepily for an hour longer, but he noticed that most of the nine other Watchers had risen, a few had already filed out.

Some, surely, were going out to preach; he'd watched two angels that night practice reciting how the Lord had made the Earth and all the angels with love, and He even touched their heads sometimes and blessed them.

Fluttering his wings a little, Azazel stepped down and walked past the three angels still resting, one on the ground but cocooned in his wings upon a pile of Heaven-made quilts. He reached the pouch of his belongings, untied the long silk over his hair, and adjusted his braids to

fall onto his shoulders. Then, he reached for his tunic and quickly pulled it off — or at least attempted to, stopping once he was standing nude and hearing a chuckle behind him. He swallowed, then tried to fold the clothing in his hands regardless. ‘Armoni and I always told Dina to pretend you don’t hear it.’ He reached for a longer tunic, with long sleeves and lace hem, from his bag to throw over himself, then tugged it into place.

“Seeking to whore on Earth too, sinner?” teased one of the Watchers.

There was another laugh this time, but Azazel swiftly headed for the entrance, ignoring the sound of an angel snickering to the other about how Samyaza should have argued with God on bringing sinners to Earth.

‘I almost agree.’ Azazel prayed he looked decent enough as he stepped out into the breeze, stretching both arms over his head. He clenched his eyes shut, just momentarily, then heard a call from a bird again and fluttered open his sight once more — seeing already a line of humans forming outside Enoch’s nearby hut. Men, women, restless children, and bundled infants strapped to backs or held in arms; when they noticed the angel, they greeted him with nodding. The humans were strange; Azazel wondered if there were some social cues that he was missing, something one could only know if they were born there. But, he smiled at them, tried not to scrunch his nose at their odor.

The goats were still yapping — thirsty perhaps. Azazel had looked after them the day before, and though some of the humans warned him it was boring work, he didn’t mind it, and he appreciated sitting on their clay fence, feeling the humidity trickle on his skin. It was better, at least, than following behind a Watcher gathering young men and women, sitting them down, to begin preaching, speaking always abstractly, theoretically, fumbling at every practical question of exercising God’s morality. “But if a man tried to force himself on me,” a woman had asked, “then shouldn’t I kill him?” And the Watcher had replied that a man shouldn’t do that, so she need not worry.

Walking past the line of humans, Azazel ducked through the doorway, then saw Samyaza wetting some cloth rags with a bowl of water atop a wooden counter.

Azazel wanted to ask if Samyaza would assign him to tend the cattle again, or if he would be sent to be the shadow behind a preaching Watcher; he hoped for the former. What were all these angels thinking in trying to proselytize? To preach, you must know, and what did angels know about God? They knew He was large, larger than them, greater than the universe. And how to explain that to a human, who was so small that they saw the angels as great, saw the sun as distant, the cosmos as unreachable?

Without lifting his eyes, the leader of the Watchers said, "There's some leftover lamb there." Azazel flickered his gaze to a point further down the counter, where some meat was wrapped in yet another cloth, shielding it from insects, who still buzzed around and landed on the bundle uselessly. But it was quite small, not much longer than Azazel's hand. "I told Enoch to give us angels small portions, up until the fruit of the Watcher's labor grows." He paused, then cleared his throat. "It's more important for the humans to have good meals." He raised one of the cloths from his bowl and wrung it in his hands until it began to spill the excess back into the water. "Being an angel is about sacrifice."

"Right," Azazel said simply, reaching for his food, unwrapping it, staring at the semi-charred, roasted skin. He sunk in his teeth, tearing through into the tenderness, feeling its dry texture come apart, enter his mouth, then get ground between his molars. "Mm." Juicy, hearty — the lamb was good, which was almost unfortunate, now that he knew he couldn't have more. "And what will I do today?" He wanted to ask quickly so that he could leave Samyaza to deal with the humans outside.

"Wait." Samyaza put the cloth down on the counter, looked out the entrance, then back to Azazel. He murmured, "Before they come in, I needed to ask you something." Instantly, Azazel began to fear he was going to be scolded, but Samyaza's face seemed too perplexed — his face twitching in nothing close to anger. "Have you seen a certain woman walking around at night? Her hair is dark and curly, and she has a necklace of bones."

"Hm? No, not at all." Azazel didn't wander around much, particularly not at night, though he knew Samyaza had taken to going on walks. "Why?" Samyaza's mouth parted, but there was some shouting

outside — two men, one saying he had been there first and another saying he had lost his place in line. Instantaneously, the younger angel moved to the entrance, lowered his head so that he didn't strike the top of the doorway, and then assured the humans that he would be with them soon, that fighting would get them nowhere. Samyaza stepped back, exhaling slow, then returned to the counter just as Azazel murmured, "I can help you here, if you like."

Samyaza shook his head. "You don't know how to heal."

Azazel took another bite of his food, but his stomach was clenching, and he decided that if he were going to go hungry, he might as well starve. "I can try."

"I'm not going to waste time teaching you," Samyaza said, curtly, then turned his head, looked the other angel in the eyes. "And it's too late. I already promised you to the hunters."

"What?" Azazel blinked, took half a step back. "Promised me?"

"You've seen them, haven't you? There are a few groups, but the largest travels up the mountain every few days, and they've been struggling to catch any animals, so I said I'd send them an angel." Azazel barely got a syllable out of his mouth before Samyaza interrupted, "You don't need to hunt with your own hands. But you're an angel. I think you'll bring them luck, and you can talk to the trees and fly above them to be a good watcher." He chuckled at his own joke.

Azazel frowned, but he didn't see how this would be any better or worse than what he'd been doing, so he shrugged his shoulders. "As you wish, younger brother." He wrapped the half of lamb that he'd left unfinished, then stepped away. "Where do I go?"

"You should find them by the forest and the river, near where us Watchers came out from when we first arrived." Samyaza furrowed his brow at him, as expected. "Don't be trouble, Azazel. Don't stay out too late with the men." He reached across the counter, took a small, sheathed dagger that Azazel hadn't noticed prior, then extended it to him.

'Maybe you've done this just so I can be out of sight,' Azazel thought but simply mumbled that he would be good, taking the dagger.

When he left, he brushed past the humans again, unable to keep

from catching their faces, their bodies, and then he remembered, remembered the awful things of Earth — the brokenness, of limbs, and the rasps of coughs, and swollen, red skin, and groans, all the pain of illness and accident. Wailing; it belonged to an infant in the arms of a young girl, perhaps a sister, but there were also drawn-out cries from an older man, who was being held by a younger one. Another man was carrying a child in his arms, no more than bones, and Azazel looked away.

‘Maybe it’s not so bad,’ Azazel thought, ‘that I go and help the hunters and leave this place, if only for a bit.’ He headed for where Samyaza had indicated, taking a moment to unsheath the dagger he’d been gifted, only to snort when he saw the end of the heavenly silver blunt and chipped.

By the edge of greenery up the mountain, there were a dozen men, flutters of talk moving between them, occasional laughter. All of them — stocky and short as all humans were. Most were in no more than a white loincloth, though it had some short tassels that dangled onto their thighs. Loose capes hung from some of their shoulders, tied at the front with simple string, all composed of animal skins, spotted and stripped. Azazel hadn’t seen many humans with shoes — noticed instead how their soles grew tough and hard — but these had sandals made of leather. More than half of the men were bearded, with lines of blooming age falling by their tear ducts, and along their cheekbones, and on their foreheads, which themselves were marred by receding hairlines and grayed by their temples. By their feet — spears, the wooden ends dug into the Earth, the sharpened obsidian tips by their heads.

And as Azazel approached, the sound of dirt crinkling beneath his feet — discussion faltered, gazes turned themselves, lips peeling back, some teeth missing. The angel, self-consciously, glanced down at himself, noticed how his tunic was threatening to tangle between his feet, and felt his cheeks flush as he raised his attention once more. Perhaps, if Samyaza had been so kind as to warn him about today’s activities, ‘I wouldn’t have come so overdressed.’ He bowed low as soon as he was within hand’s reach of them, finding his heart-stirring, and he greeted them: “Men. I’m Azazel.”

“Angel Azazel,” said a deep, rasp of a voice that made him almost

startle. "You're the angel that Samyaza sent us?" Lifting his head, Azazel straightened up, seeing a man step forward, a little ahead of the others. "How lucky we are." A hand was outstretched, but the angel didn't see it at first, his gaze caught on the speaker. "I'm the chief of the hunters."

He was the largest human, though still shorter than Azazel, with large, broad shoulders, thick arms, thick abdomen, and thick, though not too long, onyx-black hair, grayed in parts. There was hair beneath his nose, running along his jaw and parallel to his ears, reaching the hair of his scalp. Azazel noticed that he also was haired on his forearms and along the ample chest exposed by the front parting of his cape. There was an emerald-shade feather in his shaggy hair that brought out his eyes — a deep green. All this, and he was scarred, quite heavily, across his face, along his throat — all the pale lines in pairs like the scratches of animals; in some cases, the indents of bites, particularly along the left side of his face, where canines appeared to have dug in and dragged. Altogether, he was rugged.

Azazel, slowly, offered his own hand, felt first the roughness of the human's skin before the man took his palm, lifted it, then pressed his lips, fast, to his knuckles. Immediately, the angel jumped, to which the other men laughed.

"Eitan!" they chided him, though smiling, nudging one another.

At this, Eitan grinned and relaxed his hold on Azazel, who pulled his hand back and held it, his eyebrows curved confusedly. He found his face warming again, at the laughter, which was much kinder than the laughter of the Watchers in the hut.

"Excuse me, excuse me," Eitan said. "I was just trying to be nice. My name is Eitan."

"Of course," Azazel said, glanced at the others, then smiled a bit nervously. "Thank you for being nice, Eitan."

"You angels are beautiful," said another man, but a much younger one, without a beard, only to jostle and grab his spear with both hands in a flush of embarrassment. A friend at his side jabbed him and whistled a teasing tune, then the two were shoving one another, and Azazel reasoned that they were only overwhelmed with angelic faces, understandably so. While these humans were all littered with blemishes, with crooked parts, the features of angels were mostly symmetrical, their eyes

alive and distinctly odd-shining, their edges more delicate and their curves more purposefully placed by a God. Nothing about angels sagged or drooped un-beautifully. Their bodies were upright, yet soft, and faux-ly delicate, strength in all the nimble fingers and un-calloused skin.

And Azazel wasn't simple-minded enough to confuse why he was being admired. He knew he was beautiful; before the war, his looks had been complimented often; at the same time, he'd never thought he was excessively gorgeous. He was appropriately beautiful, he'd always thought, just enough to be pleasant, never enough to hurt. And for that, you might think, he should be quite grateful. Beauty just to love and hold, tend, and pamper. To accentuate with paints, by his eyes, his lips.

'I miss that,' he thought wistfully, 'painting my face.'

"All of you, settle down," Eitan laughed, then went up to a man and struck him hard, though playfully, on the back of the head. "Start walking." The hunters groaned but turned on their heels, began putting one foot before the other, as Eitan grinned back at Azazel. "Excuse the men — you see, they're men." Azazel didn't understand, but he laughed, amusedly, regardless. "Come. Because I'm just a man, too, I'll need you by my side, angel."

When the hunter began walking, Azazel followed, putting both hands behind his back and holding them. "I warn you," he began, happy words were coming easy to him — all the usual awkwardness of speaking to humans missing, "We angels don't hunt in Heaven, so I won't be much help."

"You're helping already," said the man.

"But I haven't done anything yet," said the angel.

Eitan smiled widely and took a few steps forward, reaching to push a branch out of the way. "After you, angel," he said, and Azazel caught some of the men ahead look back, some chuckling, some rolling their eyes; then, the angel smiled and took the invitation. His cheeks were wonderfully warm but not comparing to the warmth in his chest, where his heart fluttered at the sweet attention.

At the same moment, Samyaza was miserable. He worked his hands pruned and raw, dipping them again and again into a bowl of river

water to clean bloodied rags, but he found that the more times he did it, the clear blue further pinkened, then reddened. Before him, the water was becoming blood, or perhaps it was becoming wine, so diluted that all the taste was gone. He kept frowning at this and asking one of Enoch's great-grandsons — particularly, an inconspicuous older man named Noah — to fetch another bowl of water. Noah, or any other of Enoch's descendants, always took the blood-water bowl away and left the hut, but Samyaza wasn't sure what was done with it. Did the men drink it or did they dump it on the soil so that plants would grow? Could flowers drink blood? Could the angels have fed their tulips and lilies and marigolds in Heaven with blood, all this time?

Around him — the wails of human pain and suffering.

Samyaza reached for a new cloth, whispering a thanks to the boy who brought him clean water, then took a final look at the pile of rags that the blood of humans had stained, just like that water. 'Blood ruins,' Samyaza thought before returning his attention, finally, to his dozen patients, many sitting on the dirt floor, over mats, waiting for the angel to come mend them of sickness or disorder. Taking the bowl and rag, he began again.

"Hello," Samyaza greeted a pre-pubescent child with tired eyes and a deformed arm, much smaller than the other, leading to a hand seemingly melded shut and twisted awkwardly at the wrist. At their side was an adolescent girl, likely a sibling, who looked well. "May I see?" He moved onto his knees and spoke with the trembling-voiced sister, terrified for her lesser-abled brother, but Samyaza soon sighed and said, "He's not hurt. I can only heal what's broken."

"But he can only use one arm."

"That's not brokenness."

The sister scoffed, except it was sad, frustrated, rather than mean. "He can't do what the rest of us can."

"That doesn't make him broken."

"I want him to live as easy as us."

"I'm sorry," Samyaza replied.

There was nothing to say, or think, after this, and Samyaza went through his routine, helping all those he could and telling those that he couldn't that he was an angel, not God, and yes, he could perhaps try

speaking to God later. He didn't eat, instead working himself until his shoulders began to ache, his hands tremble, his eyelids weighed. When he'd begun to stagger in place, he asked to be given a moment of rest, then stumbled outside, ducked beneath the low entrance.

Those still in line looked at him, called for him, but Samyaza put his palms together and pleaded for just some minutes. Immediately after, he was walking away quickly, cringing, raising a hand to run through his long hair clammily. Where was Enoch? Ever since that elderly man had regained his vision, he'd become a wanderer. Samyaza could only see humans and a few Watchers scattered around, some angels carrying things for the people, one sitting and speaking with women and children. He was describing Heaven, pointing upward and telling the small humans to memorize the way there. The children, laughing, were too concerned asking if they could touch his face, his hair. When they asked to see his wings, the Watcher ushered them out of his back and flapped them to happy, excited squealing.

Samyaza felt exhaustion continue to lead him away, the noises of the children and angel growing dim. He searched for a corner of the village that no one might notice, and he found a mound of dirt, where he plopped down, sighed great. His eyelids falling shut, he craned his neck back, feeling the warmth of the sun char his cheeks. If this were Heaven, he may have had some semblance of silence, but Earth was loud — bustling and crying like it was constantly wounded and every animal had to screech on its behalf. *Crunch, crunch* — the sound of bare feet pressing on the dirt, but Samyaza didn't shift, didn't move. He crinkled his nose instead, hoping it wasn't a Watcher needing to be led when he was tired of giving orders and was desperate for anyone to take his authority away.

"Angel." A woman's velvet voice, though perhaps detached. "Ay, angel."

Samyaza didn't open his eyes, barely saying, "Yes?"

"Once you're done basking in the sun, you'll help a woman, won't you?"

"I'm trying to breathe," Samyaza replied.

"Help me, and I'll cook you something. How does that sound?"

Samyaza hadn't realized he was hungry, but the promise made his

stomach lurch and, finally, eyes flutter open to the open skies. “Hm?” He turned, and then he saw her, and he jumped to his feet. “Oh my— What happened to you? Sit, sit there.”

Her lip was burst open, like a fruit split to gush juice; a brown eye with its white turned pink was partly hidden by the swollen skin surrounding it; red trickled down from a jagged, though small, cut at her cheek. Even still, a grin bloomed from her mouth, a gap between her two front teeth, then a cackle, as she swerved over, sat where Samyaza had been. She leaned back onto her elbows, quirked an eyebrow up at the angel. Her dark curls were twisted like vines over her shoulders, spilling onto her front and back, brushing the necklace of bones resting over her chest. On her body — a beige, thin dress, completely unadorned; on her face — a small nose and the lines of middle-age. “I heard,” she said, “that you can heal.”

Samyaza almost tripped over his feet, about to hurry for the water he had left behind before he noticed the necklace. Quickly, he said, “Wait, you’re the woman I see at night.”

“Me?”

“You—” Samyaza coughed, unsure suddenly why he had ever wanted to speak with her. “Who did this to you? Tell me before I get what I need to heal you.”

“My husband,” she said mundanely.

Samyaza blinked, leaning away. “Your husband?”

“Men,” the woman said, “are a mystery.”

“They are,” Samyaza replied, nodding to her and to himself. “Yes, they are.”

With one eye, she stared up at him, and when Samyaza healed her, she said little else.

CHAPTER 11



During a hunt, Azazel found, in the remains of rockfall, some unsmelted silver ore, and that night, privately, worked it. That is, he heated it with some fire he coaxed to burn brighter, beat it with a plain stone, then attached this new silver to the blade he'd been gifted. It was simple, and he thought nothing of it, and he brought the dagger with him for the next hunt.

As for those hunts — the men always made time for rest. They arranged themselves in a circle beneath the fall of light, creeping in through any gap of overhead tree canopy. And they talked a while, sharing stories of their families and friends, then they'd turn to Azazel and ask him questions too – serious ones in between the humorous ones. They seemed afraid of being serious for too long, but not keen to prod at human behavior, the angel smiled and answered them. Yes, there is food in Heaven; yes, there are flowers and the angels gather them and braid them into their hair; yes, they write songs and share houses; yes, they are happy.

Then, they asked if angels marry, if angels have children.

"We don't have children," Azazel said, playing with his sheathed dagger. "You marry for children, right?" He didn't know how children came to be, but he supposed it had something to do with men being husbands and women being wives. He imagined it: man and woman

traveling somewhere special to them both, taking some dirt and making a small human in their image, like God. And Azazel wondered, ‘Why don’t angels marry?’ If men were husbands, if women were wives — why couldn’t angels be one or the other, or both, neither? Lovers.

Another day, the men killed a young, though as giant as three men in height, tiger. Here is how it occurred: the angel asked an overhead bird where the nearest large animal was and, preening itself, the bird had sang to him the direction of some gray talus at the base of a cliff. There, the tiger had been sleeping as humans approached it, each step both quiet and far, far, too loud. Each breath — hitched and tied to the tip of their tongue. Azazel, gingerly, touched the arm of Eitan the chief, who glanced over at him, then smiled wide. He was the first to lunge, to pierce the animal’s stripes with a thrust of his spear, by the throat, but all his men followed. Azazel lingered behind, the sharp cries of the creature making him grimace and look away. The grunts of men overtook the high growl of the feline and the swishing of its body until victorious cheers blared. When Azazel turned back, he saw blood and an animal lost among it.

Where did the living go when they died? ‘I don’t know.’ Was death true? ‘What if all the dead linger? What if souls remain to watch their body be devoured?’

Another time, they were resting again, and a young man strutted over to Azazel, who was leaning against a pine. The angel played with the end of a braid, twiddling it between fingers and tugging on his scalp, as he looked over. With a boyish smile and boyish nerves making him fiddle his hands, the man asked, “Azazel, angel—” Azazel liked that they always called him angel; it was charming; he’d never put so much thought into being an angel but it was now wondrous and mystical. “I was telling my mother what you said about demons, that they’re fallen angels.” Azazel nodded. “But I was curious about the time before they fell. Before evil? What did you angels do then?”

“We loved God,” Azazel replied because it was true; he remembered loving Him. “But it was different then, We worshiped Him by being happy. We did whatever we liked. There weren’t any laws, and we didn’t have to pray so often. I was very happy then.” Hesitating, then adding: “I’m the angel of body painting. I used to decorate my skin

everywhere, and I colored by my eyes, and I painted my mouth.” The men tilted their heads at this, and Azazel laughed, realizing how ridiculous it sounded. “But I don’t do that anymore. Now, it’s...” It was sinful, someone had decided — Samyaza perhaps. “It’s not so proper to do, is all.”

“You’re with us,” said yet another man, this one much older and sitting on a log. “You’re free to do whatever you like here. We won’t tell God.” Everyone laughed at this, even the angel, who’d felt some melancholy creeping. “If you want to paint your face, then you should.”

“I don’t have any good paints,” Azazel laughed back. “Even if I did, I don’t want to do anything that might upset God.” He had learned his lesson, after all. “But thank you. You’re all very kind. Kinder than angels.” And all the men flushed, waving a hand, telling Azazel that he was simply nice.

As these weeks passed, Samyaza noticed the lines of sickly humans outside Enoch’s hut become shorter, as the long-term illness and injuries were addressed, and he leaned to appropriately help those who were less-abled. He panicked less, became a little more comfortable with handing orders, though the hunger was bringing dull pounds to his head and fatigue made his knees knock together and his eyes fall shut too early. At this, Enoch promised they would send someone to the other tribes to gather food, but Samyaza insisted that he was fine; all the angels would be fine.

Then, Samyaza had seen the cured, dried leaves in the arms of the elderly man, who stood in the heat while the angel sat on a bench by Enoch’s hut, shielded from the sun. “What’s that?”

“Oh, I was recording your arrival.” Enoch laughed, jolly. “Before I went blind, you see, they called me Enoch the Scribe.” Samyaza hadn’t realized the humans were literate, so he asked to see, and soon found himself staring at what, as expected, wasn’t much of a writing system. It was primarily pictographs, though there were some syllables associated with certain symbols, and Samyaza could see how it could soon become something coherent, or maybe it wouldn’t — the humans seemed to love their complexity. Even still, Samyaza pointed Enoch in the direction of a certain Watcher, the angel of words.

Two months passed, eventually, and the stink and weirdness of the humans were beginning to give way to something else.

Azazel asked the men a few questions of his own. They told him: yes, they wash, but perhaps less often than angels; yes, they have jewelry, but they make them principally from the bones of the animals they eat; yes, they're happy, though they might die one day. About love, the men more often mentioned their children and their siblings and friends than their wives, but some did speak about the women they loved, because often it was a long list, from the girls of their boyhood to the women of their age.

When Eitan spoke, he proclaimed with a certain pride that he'd only ever loved men, and that he'd had a lover, a childhood friend he, one day, began to kiss. At this, Azazel felt a soft surprise leave his mouth in the form of a breath; he hadn't known that men could love men. Hadn't God created man and woman to love each other? But Eitan, somberly, continued, "I watched him wither, over months. The sickness took his mind, first, but I told myself there was nothing wrong, and then his body started to crumble around him. It was only then that I realized he had already died, and I don't know when. It must've been a bad spirit, or something he ate, or the water. When I buried him, I felt I had no right to grieve. He'd died long ago."

Azazel, quietly, whispered that he was very sorry, and Eitan said that he didn't mind. His lover was still among them, somewhere. Humans don't go to Heaven, after all, so they must stay somewhere on the Earth, scattered upon it. The angel had smiled, and he thought humans were maybe quite wonderful and mystical too.

He began staying out in the forest with them too late, always arriving back at the village after the night had begun creeping over the land. A few times, Samyaza would meet Azazel at the edge of the settlement, frowning, but Azazel waved him away. Simply, he went off to rest each time, in the hut where all the Watchers were, changing into something comfortable to sleep in and avoiding the glare of Samyaza, who'd come in after him and undressed as well. They each got into their hammocks or blankets, dreamt, woke once more, and fell into a routine.

For a time, there was nothing very eventful except for the occa-

sional gray cloud, bloated with shower, and Samyaza and that woman. He saw her again from afar, one day, and she had a child on her hip. Another time, he saw her husband, losing the hair on his head and revealing a hole of plain skin — something that made Samyaza shudder a little; angels didn't cut their hair, after all. And the man would grab her arm, argue with her, and sometimes there were four children around, listening to their shouting, and Samyaza would listen with them. Sometimes, the woman caught Samyaza staring, and she would stick her tongue out at him or furrow her brow comically in a mimicry of the man. Samyaza and her only exchanged words in passing — in the literal sense. One night, brushing past, the angel said, "You should go home. It's late."

The woman stopped, laughed. "I have work to do, angel."

"What work do you do?"

"Something I'm sure you angels don't understand." Beneath the moonlight, her onyx eyes had flashed as she leaned close with thin lips twisted upward into a smirk. "Or am I wrong?" When Samyaza had simply blinked, she waved and stepped back. "Go rest, sweet thing."

As she walked away, hips swinging, Samyaza had stared with a tilt of his head, catching all the feminine traits on her — though not really the curves, but rather the longer hair, and the roundness of her face. Her legs — plump thighs, revealed by the high cut of her dress. He wondered why she'd dress like that, so late at night, and for some reason, Samyaza remembered her husband. 'Does he love her?' How was it that husbands even loved? Did a husband tuck the curls of hair behind a woman's ear and kiss her cheek and grab her body where it was soft and squeeze, just to feel the warmth of life and meet it with the touch of love? 'What am I thinking?' The angel didn't know, but he felt maybe her husband wasn't right for her, maybe no husband would be, maybe no man was good enough for a woman.

Then, he left.

All these uninteresting events eventually culminated in a meeting at the mountain, which they called Mount Hermon.

The sun had just fallen, and a fire was dancing on charcoal amid a hundred angels — a half of the Watchers had been ordered to stay behind. Shadows flung out onto those sitting on the ground, on rocks,

on fallen trees dragged here, and even onto the angels perched on branches above, perhaps with a fruit they'd scavenged. The only one who stood was their leader — Samyaza, all his loose curls in a series of braids, with one strand having escaped, curved to flick at his jaw. He said, "Kokabiel, Baraqiel, step forward please." Then, as the two moved to him, he said, "I heard you two are disobeying my orders to stay with your tribes."

Baraqiel answered quickly: "It was just one visit."

"You're friends," Samyaza replied, "that I know, but before that, you're leaders. When we return to Heaven, you two can go back to spending all of eternity in each other's arms or whatever it is you do." The jest was so unprovoked that nearly all the Watchers laughed.

Baraqiel was the one who replied again, in his soft voice: "Excuse us, Samyaza."

Kokabiel didn't speak, his usual giggling to himself also absent.

Samyaza sighed — in a calm, soft way. "I'd just like to ensure that none of us get distracted from our purpose here." He eyed his other leaders in particular, then added, "Update us on what's happened."

As Baraqiel and Kokabiel returned to their seats, Azazel glanced over at Armoni, who sat beside him over the grass, and he leaned close, murmuring, "How are you, brother?"

Armoni whispered, his face expressionless: "Decent. I've been taking care of the elder." Azazel replied that he'd heard this. "I have to wash him, feed him, clean the defecation from his thighs."

"What's that?" Azazel asked before listening in horror.

Before them, Danel climbed back onto his feet and said, "The people of my tribe have been very receptive." He'd been assigned to a nomadic people. "I think, as we speak, they have nothing but hope." He began walking, circling the bonfire. "It's almost too well. I've heard that sometimes demons attack, but I haven't seen any sign of them yet."

Samyaza replied, "I suppose God is protecting us on our mission."

Abruptly, Armoni turned away from Azazel and called out, "Samyaza, I have a question." Both Samyaza and Danel twisted their heads, and all the other Watchers did too; their faces were perplexed

more than offended, though some, such as Danel, seemed to border more on the latter. "No one snarl at me. It's just a simple thing."

"Then what is it?" Samyaza asked carefully.

"When do we know we've succeeded?" Armoni replied, prompt and proper. "Will God tell us?"

Azazel's gaze flickered from his friend to his overbearing housemate, whose brows now twitched. Scrambling to Armoni's defense, he added, "I'd like to know too." Not that he was in any hurry to return to Heaven; he thought of the hunters and their laughter. "I like the humans. I want to know when they'll be considered saved."

Danel replied, "If I remember correctly, the Lord told Samyaza that he'd send an angel."

"But," Samyaza added, "I suppose there's no harm in communicating with God ourselves. I'll pray tonight, and I'll see if any voice speaks to me."

"It's only that I've been quite bored," Armoni said, and Azazel resisted the urge to throw his hand over his friend's mouth to keep him from flirting anymore with death.

"That doesn't surprise me," said Danel. "Of course salvation wouldn't interest a sinner like you."

"It's true," replied Armoni, "it doesn't." He gave a pleasantly forced smile. "Something else that's true is that there's less to do here than we thought. The humans simply listen to us, are interested in salvation. They live so modestly that asking them to stray from sin is easy. They're like worms."

Samyaza was the one who made a grunting, angry noise next, but he walked, approaching the seated angel of virtue. "You would say that about God's creation?"

Urgent, Azazel stood up, stepping between his housemate and his friend. "Samyaza, don't—"

"Don't what?" Samyaza, swift, turned his ice-cold glare to Azazel. "What do you think I'll do?"

'I don't know,' Azazel thought, 'but you never do anything I like.' Breathing deep, Azazel answered, "I think Armoni's concerns are perfectly reasonable. How do we know if the humans are saved? I spend a lot of time with the men, and they're all very kind. They

misstep, and they swear, but they're very proper around me. And many, many, of them have suffered, in a way we angels can't understand. If I were God, I would bring them to Heaven already."

"But you're not God," said Samyaza simply. "So that decision isn't yours to make." Turning his head, looking away, Azazel surrendered, agreeing that he was not. "I'll pray to our Lord, or speak with one of the archangels, but we'll continue with our duty, helping the humans and teaching them of God."

To Azazel's relief, another angel spoke: "Azazel speaks of the men, but the women, to me, are very pleasant. Granted, I've been helping with weaving, so I'm surrounded by them all day. But, they're very sweet, and they all have a good sense of humor, and they're all very tender. I envy their husbands." At this, Azazel quirked an eyebrow, and many others seemed to have given him strange looks. "I mean," the angel added quickly, "in that I wouldn't mind being around a woman all the time. They're pleasant to talk to, and they're very smart, and they're beautiful."

"They're like angels," offered Danel. "It's something I noticed."

Samyaza, oddly, seemed offended by this. "They're humans."

"But they all suffer," Danel replied, so flat he was almost unrecognizable, "because of one of their own, who was vain and self-serving. And all of them have been damned to serve men." It was something that made all the angels shift in their seats, and Azazel felt himself step back in surprise. He hadn't thought Danel considered angels to suffer, but he went on: "And, like us, the women watch God concern Himself with this other creation, this man, and they must feel like some adjunct of His love." Then, a bitter laugh. "Maybe this is all unrelated."

Armoni put a hand over Azazel's after he'd sat, and he looked at him with soft eyes that said gratitude even when his mouth didn't. Azazel smiled at him, though weakly. The words of Danel had stirred his mind like an angel's hand in water, but he felt damaged rather than healed.

Samyaza, quietly, replied, "This is an interesting thing to consider. Yes." There was something newly shaken about his shoulders, a curve in his brows that had appeared uninvited, and a squirm at his lips telling Azazel that their leader was fighting a frown. What was it that

was bothering him? Azazel wondered if it was the same words that had bothered him. “This was a worthwhile discussion. Please, everyone, return to your tribes and get some rest. Tomorrow, there’ll be more work to do. God bless you all.”

Adjunct of His love.

Another week later, Azazel helped the hunters kill an animal once more. From steps away, he saw the men cut through the tough skin of a mountain lion, and he watched it die, this time. Here is how it died: its legs spasmed beneath the weight of multiple men thrown on top of it, its jaw opened wide, revealing the sharp teeth, the tongue, and pink hills on the roof of its mouth. The scream was a guttural hiss, breaking with every pierce into its body, the stabs sliding each time easier and easier. Blood came from the injuries and from its mouth, all river-ing to a sea beneath the body it had only ever known from the inside. The blood of limbs, the blood of mouth, the blood of eyes — all intermingling and introducing themselves by their corpse.

The men cheered happily, embracing each other, then laughing because this would surely feed their families another few days. And Eitan pulled the spear from the latching flesh, then turned back and grinned wide at Azazel with his face flushed, his face dotted in the sweat of force. “Angel!” he called lovingly. “With you here, it’s like Heaven has already come!”

Azazel heard the other men laugh, and he smiled, then laughed too, breathlessly, flustered and smiling, giddily, about it.

When the men dragged the beast to a clearing, Azazel prepared them a fire, and soon enough, it was time to rest yet again, this time over the dirt with the men feeling overly friendly. They asked to touch Azazel’s wings, and easily, he shrugged them out and let a few filter through his feathers with wonder. Like they always did, the men barraged him with their curiosity, and then they asked if angels loved. Azazel said they did, they did love. He, personally, loved a lot. “But,” he added, “I don’t want you to misunderstand, we only love as friends.”

Satan had taught them that.

Noticing the befuddled eyes on him, Azazel continued. “We don’t marry, after all, don’t have children. Love is,” a shuddering sigh, “only for you men for women.” He looked over at Eitan, who stared at him,

head tilted. “My mistake—” Behind the head of the chief, through the leaves, the moon was rising. “For humans. Not for us angels.”

“That’s a shame,” Eitan said, then smiled wistfully, whereas Azazel was very viscerally recalling his sin now, was remembering kisses on him now, non-amicable, almost violent, passionate and inflamed — the sin of loving.

“Why is it a shame?” Azazel asked, but Eitan didn’t reply, and some of the men glanced at one another, knowing what Azazel either didn’t or was ignoring. ‘I remember that night of war in Heaven. I remember God telling me that I do not love.’ Eitan’s eyes gleamed, the dusk striking him. ‘I can’t love.’

Then, the screams reached them.

CHAPTER 12



There were roughly eight hundred huts that composed Enoch's village, but some housed as many as two dozen people — an extended family of uncles, step-mothers, aunts, mothers, fathers, step-fathers, sisters, brothers, grandmothers, grandfathers, cousins, friends named cousins. Beneath the night sky, the fire was born, an arrowhead its womb, its flame streaking across the air like shooting star. The attacker, a creature that had launched itself from a high branch on a tree, landed in a crouch at the second of impact. Fire burst, then engulfed its first meal, a hut, in reds enveloping browns, oranges taking greens — the crackles so great they, momentarily, blanketed the screaming.

Women, men, and children shouted — the infants always releasing the loudest wails from the tiniest bodies. The village itself grabbed one another, ducking their heads and trying to miss the follow-up arrows and the stone boulders suddenly flying overhead, landing on home and people alike, crushing them beneath — the crackles like those of the fire, but wetter, fleshier. Blood, sinking into the ground, and the screams of horror thereafter. Soon, the beasts were rushing out of the forestry like flood from a sea.

Samyaza — jolting away from the young girl he'd been bandaging on the arm. He lifted his head, turned, looked out the doorway, and

saw crowds of humans running past. His hand raised in an instant, gesturing for the child to stay where she was, but a Watcher who'd been sitting nearby shot to his feet. Together, the two angels hurried to peer out the entrance, and they saw all these fires, propelling from darkness, and the stones being hefted at the village, along with perpetrators.

"Samyaza—" began the Watcher.

"Destroy them," Samyaza ordered, voice fallen to a terrible whisper. "Destroy them all." Though he knew they couldn't be destroyed — these monsters, these grotesque things. At his side, the angel nodded, reaching for a stone, flimsy axe Enoch had left at the side of the hut and running opposite the humans.

'These *demons*.' Samyaza looked at the chaos and saw all the other Watchers scrambling to grab any weapon of either their own making or human. Too, he saw a woman, sprinting the same way as the angels, heading for the bloodshed. "Wait!" he shouted instinctively, then saw who she was — the bone-necklace woman, the terror on her face flowing whiteness onto her olive skin. "Woman!" Furious her name was still unknown to him, Samyaza saw no other choice but this: his wings sprang out and beat the air to fling himself at her. "Stop!"

"Don't touch me!" she screamed, jerking her body away the moment Samyaza took her arm. "My children!" Her words were each gasps; all her body was sweated; her tunic was thrown on, untied, and stained. "They're all alone!"

Samyaza stared at her wild face, pulse quickening, rising to his very throat. "Your children." He looked ahead, but the screams were bountiful, the fires were permeating every grass in their wake, and the demons in between were swinging iron maces, javelins, and war hammers. Smoke was catching on the air, creating haze — and why should he give priority to saving this woman? "Go then." He loosened his hold on her, saw a glimmer of confusion pass over her eyes, so fast it may have never happened. "Hurry." He turned to the horrors and thought, 'You will die.' She slipped through his fingers. "I'll deal with the demons."

Then, the woman ran, bare feet on the hard ground, certainly cutting on the rocks, leaving her blood trailing, telling the story of her run for death.

But Samyaza forced himself to turn away from it. He stepped back, looked now at the dozens of demons stalking around him. All together, they were hideous — something animal, something of an angel disfigured. From their heads, horns protruded, whereas their fingers — once fashioned to strum harps and embroider — had been seared to talons; some even walked with hooves, paws. Worse still — they were in extravagant robes and tunics, patterned in animal skins and in the dyes humans had yet to invent for themselves. Excessive jewelry, gleaming in moonlight, adorned every part of the demons like angels in the time before sin.

Gripped tight, their weapons — those maces and javelins of before, but also swords, axes, clubs, and bludgeon of every other kind — were made from metals that Samyaza knew the humans couldn't smelt, but occasionally, there was obsidian and jade. The demons swung, slashed, at scrambling humans, then dug in, twisting to catch any tendon and tear it out, tear it out like the agonized howling. Twenty of these beasts crept toward the leader of the Watchers from every angle, their snickering low and prodding; one even called out, "Is that you, little Samyaza?" The angel answered with a strong beat of his wings, lifting his body, and still seeing that running woman in his mind's eye. With another flap, he lunged, aiming for a javelin-wielding demon, taking the beast by the husks and dragging him through the dirt before flinging him at two demons pouncing toward him.

At the slightest brush behind, Samyaza threw his elbow back, and he struck a head but not before another demon had pierced his side with a sword. Samyaza cried out, tried flapping his wings, throwing himself back into the sky, but yet another demon grabbed his leg. Flying upward, Samyaza kicked frantically before the demon rammed one of his horns into the angel's hip, the point piercing through cloth, reddening, then skin. Yelling and shuddering, Samyaza flew higher, higher, as the demon continued to dig deep enough to scratch at bone. The attacker only lost his grip once Samyaza managed a strong shove, the sound of him falling onto another demon clouding the Watcher's gasp of relief.

'Where are the hunters?!' Samyaza turned at all the village, but the sun was gone and everything was too dark, too blind. 'Where are

they?!” He had little time to panic; soon, he felt himself grappled, so fast he hadn’t even registered a beast emerging from the night. But struggling, flailing, was useless. The air rushed past, and the gray clouds grew further. The sensation of falling, then a demon smashing Samyaza into the rocky ground by the river. Then, Samyaza saw true darkness, not night, not the stars, but a barren void as blood splurt from his mouth, and he felt his body jerk, the shock of pain on every nerve.

The beast, however, released him and rose to his feet as Samyaza, crimson dribbling past his lips, tried to lift himself only for pain to twitch up his spine. The Watcher dragged himself backward, his body shrieking at him not to move, but he planted an elbow down and leaned on it. He raised his head and began to see, began to hear. Laughing, low and rumbled. And horns, gargantuan, by the temples of the great, burly demon who could have blended into the hills of the horizon. Behind him, there were wings but non-feathered, skin-like, starlight leaking in between the bones.

“Hello there,” he chuckled. “It’s a lovely night out, isn’t it?”

“Who,” Samyaza forced out every word, every syllable stinging, “are you?”

“Baal,” said the demon. “What, don’t you recognize me?” There were some familiar features left — his brown eyes, his bronze skin where it hadn’t been disfigured, his voice, though more garbled. But the hints of the angel of flight felt wrong now, dead now, like a mockery, like he’d become a defiled grave of himself. “I guess we never knew each other well. Samyaza, right?”

Swallowing blood, the lesser angel of healing said, “I healed you once. You fell.” That sounded like a joke, but only Baal laughed. “From up high. I—” He couldn’t remember the details. Millions of years of living, too many memories, all the actions of his life melting together in this moment that his chest was heaving, his mind was turning, ticking clockwork. “You’re a beast.” He wasn’t sure why he said it, but he repeated it. ‘Look at you, how you’ve dirtied God’s creation. Made yourself unrecognizable from how the Creator made you. So tenderly and lovingly. You monster.’

Baal’s amusement didn’t falter. “We’ve been watching you angels from afar. We thought you’d leave after delivering some message, but

we've seen you living among the humans for a few cycles of the moon. What is it you're trying to do?"

"Us Watchers," Samyaza spat proudly, "came with the grace of God to bring His humans back to Him. He extends an offer of salvation to them, and they're eager to worship Him. The last thing we need is demons getting in our way." Grunting, he put a hand beneath him, bent one leg then the other to stand, though he remained hunched, one arm holding the damage on his hip. "But we are happy to declare war on you beasts again. We host of God will protect His creation. We know all you demons do is suffer, and we'll gladly put you in your place."

Baal lifted his chin, tilted his head, looking over Samyaza's shoulder. "All we do is suffer?"

Samyaza turned curiously, seeing finally the human hunters sprint from the woods, weapons in hand that now looked terribly puny compared to those of the demons. Over their heads, Azazel was flying, but he swooped down just as they'd reached the outskirts of the huts. He landed, firmly, beside the chief Eitan.

"I see," Baal snickered, and another demon, long-haired and sultry with his steps, came up to his side. Leaning into the whispers that this other beast grazed along his ear, Baal snickered. "Hm. Thank you, Gemory." Then, at Samyaza — "We'll be leaving now."

"Leaving?" Samyaza almost hacked.

"Would you rather we stay?" Baal rolled his shoulders, taking slow steps backward. "Don't fret, angel, we only killed a hundred, or maybe two hundred. It's hard to count with the little ones." Samyaza's stomach lurched at that; he thought of all the infants he had healed, had cared for, had watched parents worry incessantly for. Baal, meanwhile, gestured for Gemory to leave and struck his infernal wings against the air, bringing himself into the sky that had rot so dark it was abyssal. Without another word, the large demon darted away, above all the flames still raging over homes, many collapsing and turning into great bonfires, even over the bodies of people whose screams cut out quickly.

Samyaza staggered the steps he needed to fall into the river, dipping past its bank where the current rushed in cold fury. "Ah—" He hissed

at the water laying its hands on all his injuries — suddenly, he felt the ache of bruises everywhere — but he gritted out his enchantments, his prayers to be healed.

It was as his skin was being stitched together that Azazel reached him, with all the hunters having scattered behind to help the efforts of saving those that weren't gone already. The angel was gasping for breath, only now pulling in his wings, but he soon clamored into the river with Samyaza. "Are you okay?!" he cried. "What happened?" In the last of pain, Samyaza groaned. "Were those demons?!"

"Yes, they were demons!" Samyaza shouted, twisting around, Azazel startling. "Hundreds of them! Look around!" And he once again staggered, climbing where cattails nuzzled his legs, his knees; the closer he got to Azazel, the faster Azazel stumbled backward, away from him. "What did I tell you?!"

"Samyaza—"

"I told you not to stay in the forest too late with the hunters! I told you!"

Azazel's face twitched, but he shook his head, and the two had reached the dry ground now. "You didn't know this was going to happen, Samyaza. Don't act like I should've—"

"You can't do *one* thing for me?" Samyaza cried.

"One thing?!" Azazel yelled back. "You ask me to do a hundred things, every day. All you do is ask. All you do is order. All you do is tell me what to do, and blame me, and—" Voice cracking, giving way to all the frustration that itched Azazel's eyes. "Stop making me the culprit of everything bad that's happened or will happen!"

"This is your fault."

"No, Samyaza," Azazel replied, roughly low, feeling the words in his very gut, "it's not." He stepped further away, hearing the overbearing clamor of misery leaking into their meaningless argument. "Go and help the humans." With this, he hurried away from the leader of the Watchers, who watched him leave with a flinch. He was dripping wet, a breeze making him shiver, and he loosened the tension in his jaw before finally trudging forward. Calling for the other angels, Samyaza ordered for them to gather all the living, all the close-to-dead, and the dead.

And it was so: for the next several hours.

The moon swam along until it reached its overbearing zenith, and the Watchers hastily worked alongside the hunters and the most abled, or most determined, humans. They listened for screams first, hurrying to dig bodies from rubble or carry the injured to the line forming where Samyaza tried to doctor as quickly as he could, along with some other Watchers who could heal well enough. And, counting bodies, Samyaza saw that Baal had been true to his promise — over a hundred dead, perhaps a hundred fifty. Maybe there were a few more that weren't accounted for yet, but they would come to more precise numbers within a few days, as bodies were uncovered, as graves were dug. The stench could not be worse — rank, unpleasantly cooked — but there was no escape except perhaps Heaven, but only God can decide when we go to Heaven.

At this same time, Azazel found himself speaking with a group of two dozen children, all shivering and huddled, faces darkened by ash, though all physically safe. He whispered for them to calm as wails of fear and misery kept sounding from them. Seeing one pre-teen girl with a particularly loud, crying infant in her arms, Azazel said, "Let me hold the child." Initially, the girl offered him a frightened expression, but when Azazel extended his hands, she handed the infant over. And Azazel pulled him close to his chest, sighing nervously because he'd never touched such a small, delicate thing before; yet, in being held by an angel, the infant's cries ebbed steadily. Soon, they were blinking their beady, hazel eyes up at Azazel.

"Angel!"

Just as Azazel raised his head, the child reached him — Naamah, looking as grimy as the other children — and not far behind, it was Eitan, having removed his cape and having left himself in a partly undone loincloth dangling fabric between his legs. "Oh." Azazel cleared his throat, his gaze flickering away a moment, rocking the infant in his child instinctively, not minding the feeling of this tiny creature against him. "Eitan. Naamah." He looked to them again. "What are—?"

Naamah interjected, "My uncle said you're responsible for all of this."

"That's not what I said," Eitan said quickly. "I was telling Naamah

that the hunters arrived late because you helped us catch a mountain lion, and then we spent time talking.”

Quite suddenly, a child came up to Azazel’s leg and latched on, putting his cheek against the angel’s lower thigh. Azazel, without thinking, lowered one hand to place on his head, feeling the choppy hair there. “Well, yes. I’m sorry.” The boy at his leg was whining, high, breathless. “I shouldn’t be distracting you men from coming home early.”

Eitan scoffed. “Don’t apologize. How were you supposed to know the demons would attack?”

Azazel felt warmth tease his lips up into a tiny smile. “It was still my mistake.” He adjusted so that he could better hold the infant, and then he nodded. “But I’m happy you, at least, are safe.” He noticed Eitan’s own smile grow softer, then he, added, fumbling, “And all the other hunters, of course. And I’m happy Naamah, too, is safe. I didn’t know you were family.”

“Everyone is family,” Naamah replied, looking between the angel and the other children, all about Naamah’s age or younger.

Azazel laughed a bit at that. “I meant close family, then.”

“Naamah,” grunted Eitan, “go take care of your great-grandmother.” The child hesitated but turned on their heel, leaving without much struggle or arguing. Azazel frowned, wanting to say that Eitan shouldn’t send his family off when things remained fire and devastation, but then the chief looked at him gravely. “Don’t blame yourself. We’re humans, after all. The demons would have massacred us. In my opinion, you saved our lives, so God has blessed us through you. And feelings like regret are no use, so see the good in me, and the other hunters, still being here.”

Azazel couldn’t help his frown, regardless. “I didn’t know demon attacks were frequent.”

“They are, and then they’re not. If there was an easy pattern, we would have been able to figure it out by now. But those demons are smart, and I think we are too.” Eitan glanced at the baby in Azazel’s arms, then back at the angel. He murmured, “I believe in the angels and in God. More importantly, I believe in you.” ‘Why?’ Azazel wondered. ‘What have I done to deserve it?’ “If you don’t mind, I’ll

stay here with you and help get these children to their parents. You don't know much about human children, do you?"

Azazel admitted that he didn't.

"Then, I'll stay here with you," Eitan said before grinning at the children, and a few gave him nods, some smiles. Some knew him. "Sit. I think you're tired." Azazel said they should both sit.

Samyaza, opposingly, worked late into the night, night turning dawn.

He didn't sleep, healing the thousands of injured, alongside those Watchers who attempted to help. He did it at the river to make it quicker, dipping their heads and blessing them with renewed life. And, for some time, he tried healing the dead. A part of it was pressure from families, a part of it was his own heavy-set, horrific guilt. He sighed, over and over, splashing water over the empty eyes of humans-turned-husks. He murmured, "You are broken. To be dead is to be without a soul, like to be without a limb. Let me find your soul and bring it back. Let me heal you." But, to the sobs of family and friends, death was not brokenness, after all. And it seemed resurrection was not anything an angel could do.

Miserably, the angel watched the men, the women, and all the people hold the corpses of lovers, friends, and strangers. They shouted out for God, shouted out for all the other things they believed, and seeing it, Samyaza could only grimace, wondering of death. He thought of hearing an angel speak, for the last time, with no hope of ever listening to their chatter again, their talk. He thought of Azazel, thought of arguing for a final time. Then, he lowered his head and struck the water angrily, something he'd been told never to do. When he could handle mourning no longer, he left the river. Samyaza traveled to the same mound he'd escaped to when he was desperate for a little distance from the humans and their ills, their sufferings. He plopped on top of the dirt, curled forward, and his throat felt raw, felt beaten to dust.

"You overwork yourself."

Samyaza raised his head and saw, beneath the morning light streaming over an unfallen hut, the woman. She was oddly clean, must've changed her tunic, and her hair was picked up with a tie.

When she walked, there was a hand that went to her small back — because her figure seemed mostly legs attached to a short torso. And she settled beside the Watcher angel, leaned backward a little, facing the pink-blue sky and brightening clouds.

“But thank you,” she said. “For helping us humans.”

“It hurts me,” Samyaza replied, “seeing how you suffer. We angels don’t have death. We’ve always been able to become whole again.”

“We humans have never been whole,” the woman laughed, then grinned and tilted her head over at the angel.

“I’m,” Samyaza continued, unsure what else to do, “glad to see that you’re safe. I thought you may have died, but I didn’t see you among the bodies.”

“Me? Oh no,” she teased. “I can never die. Somehow, I always make it out unscathed. My mother always told me I was made of stone.” She tugged on her bone necklace “But I’m also very lucky. My children were outside, playing, when the demons burned our home down.”

“And your husband?” She shrugged, didn’t say much more. “I see. Regardless, your bravery was beautiful.” She laughed, and Samyaza felt his cheeks flush pleasantly. “I’m being honest. I wish I were as brave as you, to run into fire for those you love. You must’ve thought you could die, but you didn’t care.” He remembered how he’d wanted to scream for her but hadn’t known what to say. “Can I have your name? I want to remember it.”

Her hands paused fiddling. Looking over, her eyes were both tired and warm, inviting and distant. “I’ll trade you. Me — I always trade my body and soul for the things that I need, even if I don’t want.” She swiveled, made her body turn to the angel’s. “My name is Idith.”

“Idith.” Samyaza liked it, so he smiled. “What do I give you in exchange now?”

Without speaking, the woman leaned forward, pressed her lips to the angel’s soft and sweet. Fleeting as the dawn. She drew back, murmured, “A kiss from an angel is enough for me.”

CHAPTER 13



Half the livestock were slaughtered and stolen; the crops were devastated. A decapitated goat head at his feet, with no other part of its body to be found, Azazel heard that the demons must've been on the hunt for food. It confused him — ‘Can’t the demons grow their own vegetables?’ — but he supposed maybe the demons had no intention of eating what they stole and the purpose, instead, was to leave the humans starving. But this, to Azazel, didn’t make much sense either, and he had walked away from both the discussing angels and the dead animal.

In the days that followed, an elder from a faraway tribe visited, then another, with Watchers at their sides. They offered their leftovers and their storage, and soon enough, almost every tribe had offered what they had to keep Enoch’s people from starving. It wasn’t much, and Azazel figured that he’d probably have to learn to deal with an empty stomach much longer, but it was good to know the humans he’d come to know would suffer just a little less.

“It’s not rare,” Samyaza said as the Watchers, and some select humans of Enoch’s village, separated the gifts into rations, “for food sharing to happen.” The angels, over the ground and beneath the clouded sky, mentally split the tribe into provinces so that food could be assigned to each — splitting the rations by household had proven

too difficult, due to the diversity of family sizes, though this solution was not much better. “I heard from another elder that these tribes formed as protection against the demons.”

“Hm,” said Elder Enoch, “that’s what my father told me.” He was sat at his bench with one of his youngest daughters, who held tight a bundled infant that she’d given birth to a few days ago, two weeks after the attack. She was still semi-frail in her stare and her shifts, and she was wrapped up in a shawl that an angel had embroidered colorfully for good health, but she seemed happy. Samyaza hadn’t helped with the delivery, though Azazel heard from Eitan that the older women — midwives, they called them — were perfectly capable of dealing with births on their own. Azazel still had largely not determined how babies came to be, except that it was in a woman’s stomach and then it found its way out somehow. Of course, he had an idea, but he chose not to pursue that thinking.

As Azazel tied the knot on a sack of lentils, he heard Samyaza’s sandaled feet step close by before he called to the old man again, “It’s brilliant. If you’re separated, then the demons can’t annihilate all of humanity at once.”

“Though they certainly do try,” Enoch chuckled, then reached for his grandchild to bounce and pat.

Azazel raised his face to Samyaza, then asked, “The other tribes really don’t mind sending their food to us?”

Samyaza shrugged before looking down at the other angel. “I thought it was surprising too, but many of them still remember how they all share the same parents. The first humans lived a very long time, and their features remain.” He nodded his head at Enoch, holding his grandchild. “See how that infant has a large nose, the same as the mother, the same as the grandfather? The humans continue through their children. It’s how they have a taste of eternal life.”

Azazel brushed himself off, stood, and stretched his arms over his head. He yawned, though it was only a little past noon, and the sun was being quite kind today to hide behind the clouds. And he stared at the family Samyaza had pointed them to, at the happy woman with her sleeping child. “It’s cute, isn’t it?”

Samyaza quirked a brow at him “What is?”

“Having children,” Azazel replied, bringing his hands before himself, making an interlocking motion between his fingers. “Passing down your features with the features of someone else. Living eternally through something you’ve made with someone you like. It’s like working together on a painting, or a house, or even a meal.” ‘And the only cost of this is death,’ Azazel mused to himself.

A certain coolness trickled across Samyaza’s face, his eyes glossing over, his lips pressing fine, and then he stepped away from him. “You should speak with the hunters. Tell the chief that I want the hunts to resume tomorrow.”

Azazel blinked confusedly. “So you decided I’ll still be helping the hunters, after all?”

“I don’t know what else you’re good for,” Samyaza grumbled as Azazel found a giddy smile tugging at the ends of his own lips. “And the men like you, so if you’ve learned your lesson, then I’m sure it’ll be fine. You’re forgiven. Get back to doing what you usually do.”

Chuckling, Azazel replied, “There’s something different about you.”

“Hm?” Samyaza began to walk, but Azazel followed, stepping over some of the bundled rations that other Watchers had prepared. “I don’t know what you mean.”

“Hm,” Azazel echoed, smiling. “I just feel that there’s less of a bite in you than usual.”

“I don’t bite.”

“You bite me,” Azazel insisted. “All the time. So why are you forgiving me?”

“Because I was being irrational, blaming you—” Azazel hurriedly doubled his pace, stepping before Samyaza and looking at him wildly. For a few entire seconds, Azazel’s mouth was agape, his eyes widened, nothing but stammers leaving his mouth. “Don’t look at me like that.” One of Samyaza’s eyebrows twitched. “Or I’ll put you in charge of the goats again.”

Azazel laughed again, throwing his hands in the air, twisting on his heel, and walking away on his own. “Alright. As you say, dearest brother. I’ll go off to my men then.”

Samyaza's sigh sounded behind him. "Don't make another mistake."

"Mhm." As Azazel moved along, he noticed some humans staring, poking their heads out of their huts, or pretending to be busy doing mindless things like counting bird calls. It made him smile; humans seemed so eager for drama to gossip about, and maybe that was something they shared with angels, maybe that was something they had all inherited from God. Mindlessly, then, Azazel strolled across the village, searching for the outskirts group of homes where Eitan's entire family lived. It was the same place Azazel had visited whenever he walked Eitan home and had once met the hunter at dawn before they went off to lead the hunt.

And, unsurprisingly, Eitan was outside. He was talking to an elderly woman, presumably the great-grandmother that Azazel knew now was Naamah's primary guardian. As the angel approached, Eitan looked over her head and smiled broad at Azazel, then turned downward to share the news. Instantly, the old woman spun around with an almost youthful spirit, smiling even brighter than her grandson. She outstretched her hands, and Azazel took them, feeling the smoothness of his eternal youth in her toughened, wrinkled aged palms.

"The stories we told," she began, her voice wobbled and weak, "of you angels was that you were beautiful and that you were terrifying. I see that you're a beautiful one."

Azazel grinned warmly. "Thank you, but you're much prettier than me."

She laughed, letting him go, then gesturing Eitan to come closer, and then the three talked of the weather, of the crops, of having survived demons. And the older woman insisted, "I slept through the whole attack. They used to do it very often once. And it used to be much worse." Then, she tried to offer Azazel some of the food she had stored, and he tried to deny it over and over, but soon, Eitan had taken Azazel's arm, right above the elbow, and tugged him along into the woman's hut.

Azazel glanced down at Eitan's hand, and he bit his tongue. The feel of his skin was nice. 'He's never touched me like this before.' His palm was

rough, like his grandmother's. 'He holds me tightly and gently at once.' The angel felt his cheeks warm, and he forgot why he'd come, and he let himself sit with the chief of the hunters and his fussy grandmother. When cousins arrived, and children, and siblings, and friends, they met Azazel with great grins, and one child rushed to the angel and asked if he could be blessed with a kiss on the top of his head. And, soon, all the family was laughing while eating cups of gathered pecans in the light of a little bonfire.

And Samyaza, meanwhile, finished supervising the rationing, then chose to wander away, though not without turning his head in every direction to ensure no one would notice him heading toward the foresty at the feet of Mount Hermon. Before he could even begin looking, he heard the chuckling of a woman, and Samyaza looked to see her halfway hidden behind a nearby tree. "Idith," he said, trying to bite down his smile as he stepped into the forest, behind the bark with her.

Idith had her arms crossed as she leaned to rest her back against the tree, tilting her head. "An apology would be nice; I waited here too long for you. Do you think that because you're an angel I'll wait forever?"

Samyaza stared down at his feet, fiddling with one. "Forgive me. There are a lot of rations to sort through, and I wanted to ensure no child goes hungry, and I didn't mean to—"

"Oh, you take me so seriously, honey." Idith reached, took one of the minuscule braids hidden in Samyaza's waves of hair, then rolled it between two fingers. "I was just teasing. They burned my husband today, and I watched, and I even shed a tear, but I'm only tired now." Samyaza slowly lifted his gaze to see the melancholic smile on her lips. "I told you that he was cruel to me and my children, so it must've been God's judgment."

Samyaza wanted to say that a demon attack certainly had nothing to do with God, but he decided not to. "We can meet again tomorrow if you don't want to sit and talk with me today."

"Mm," Idith said. "Follow me instead. I'm worried about my daughter, so come help me with her."

Samyaza asked why she felt this way, but Idith didn't answer, instead leaning forward and kissing the edge of his lips, drawing back, then stepping away. When she walked, Samyaza, though with a little hesitance in his steps, followed; he continued to look all about, hoping

no one saw them, but he went after her obediently and never considered stopping.

Idith was staying in a small hut near Enoch's, recently rebuilt by Watchers, and she stepped through the open doorway slowly, only to move quicker toward the young girl, on her side, over a lofted mat. "Poor thing," she said quietly, sitting at the edge of the bedding.

Samyaza stepped to stand at her side, whispering, "Is she okay?" His hand reached over and hovered by the curls of hair over the child's forehead, asking silently if he could touch. "Is she in pain?"

"It's her first blood," Idith replied. "And the pain has been very strong."

"Blood? Is she bleeding?"

Idith laughed. "Women bleed, Samyaza. Often."

The angel frowned. "What are you saying?"

"You angels are supposed to know everything," Idith teased, though tiredly, "but you don't know a single thing about women."

Samyaza shifted, drawing his hand back. "We don't have women in Heaven."

"At all?" Idith turned her head. "I thought some of the Watchers were women."

"No. They're angels."

Unrelenting, her next question was: "All you angels are men?"

Samyaza furrowed his brow. "No. I said we're angels."

Idith stared, but then she laughed. "I see. I see." She raised her body, inched toward Samyaza, and gazed at him through dark lashes. "I even thought you might've been a woman when I first saw you. I wouldn't have minded that either." She reached, touched his hand, by the knuckles, then added, "Let's talk. I want to hear more about the water and how you make it do what it does. About your magic." She revealed the gap in her front teeth with a smile. "But a kiss would be nice as well."

Samyaza swallowed, his heart heating the same as his face. "You embarrass me," he admitted plainly. "Kissing is embarrassing."

"My poor, innocent angel," she teased, then reached for Samyaza's chin, tugging him down to her level. And, as it had been the last day or two, the kiss was deep, pushing up against Samyaza's lips, coaxing him

forward to meet her in need. But Samyaza felt his head grow heavy instantly, and his hands trembled at his sides, his pulse quickening in his chest and stuttering up to make him gasp. Against her, the high, choked pitch of a whine escaped him, then Samyaza's eyes widened, and he jerked back, his face entirely red.

Quickly, the woman put a hand over her mouth, stifling the laughs that made her shoulders tremble. On the bed, the girl rustled as Samyaza quickly whispered, "I'm sorry." He wanted to say he didn't know if he wanted to be doing this, that he was too scared that God was looking over his shoulder. And yet he wanted another. He wanted to kiss, and he wanted to cry, and maybe she would kiss him again, and he would sob as she did it.

She murmured, "Don't apologize. You're very sweet."

"Thank you," Samyaza said — because what else could he have said? "You're very sweet too."

Idith smiled again, softer. "I'm going to make some tea for my daughter soon, to help with the pain. Would you like some too?"

Samyaza glanced at her daughter, curled up childishly in a tunic that seemed far too big for her. "I don't understand why she's in pain."

"Being a woman is pain," Idith said. "My father used to tell me that God hates us women. It's because of us that man fell. My grandfather used to say us women are demons. And now we have to serve man for the rest of our days."

"God told us angels we must serve man too," Samyaza replied, echoing what Danel had said so long ago now at Mount Hermon. "Because of the mistake of one angel."

Idith leaned her head on Samyaza's shoulder, then sighed, "He's so cruel, isn't He?"

"He's loving," Samyaza argued but weak. "You'll see how loving He is one day. When you go to Heaven."

Hesitating — "Will you take me there yourself? Could I bring my children? My mother?"

"I think so. You could even live with me."

Careful and slow, she replied, "You'd make a good husband, Samyaza, dear." All the words within the angel's heart withered, and

then she kissed the edge of his lips. "Though, I think I'm too much of a sinner for you."

Azazel, at the other side of the village, felt Eitan take his hand — his proper fingers and palm, not his arm like before. Howling in a laugh at a joke his sister made, the hunter yanked Azazel to him. The angel was giddy, smiling still from all the kindness of Eitan's family, and the amusement of seeing Naamah groan and complain about every kiss on the cheek they received. For a moment, Azazel didn't even realize Eitan had been leading him outside, but they were suddenly out through the doorway, moving away from the simmering bonfire, and they were beneath the stars, and the shrill sounds of crickets were around them with the ribbiting of toads somewhere, perhaps by the river.

"Eitan?" Azazel called. "Where are you taking me?"

"I have a surprise for you," Eitan answered, holding an animal-skin pouch with his free hand. He had wrapped some cloth over his forehead, with a tight knot at the back, and he wore a short beige-brown tunic, brushing his lower thighs. "We won't go deep into the forest, I promise."

Azazel hadn't realized they were headed for the forest at all, but he looked ahead and saw that the trees were approaching, and he simply breathed. He trusted Eitan, after all. He had always been very kind to him, and his relatives were lovely. And Azazel felt that if he were human, he would have liked to be a part of Eitan's family; he would have liked to have any family at all but especially Eitan's. The man and angel stepped over a twisted, large branch and moved into the mouth of the woods as Azazel thought, 'If I were a human, if I were a man, I could have been your husband.' Eitan whispered for Azazel to watch his step, and their hands broke apart. 'I could have been a hunter with you. Or I could have done something closer to the home. As long as I was your husband, I don't think I would mind.'

They reached an incredibly small, cramped clearing; in fact, it was no clearing at all. The trees were merely apart enough that a log could lay on its side, and this is where Eitan went, settling down and tapping the spot beside him. After this, he reached for the pouch he had brought.

Azazel smoothed his longer tunic as he sat, and he listened to the

noise of Earth, but for once it wasn't so overwhelming and alien. Instead, it was comforting, and he found himself sinking deeper into the fantasy of humanness. He imagined having an imperfect mother, he imagined being a child, he imagined seeing his body change each day, he imagined having all of life only once, and he imagined fear and terror, then relief in the arms of family. He imagined marrying, imagined kisses every morning and embraces so tight they might merge into one being altogether.

In the darkness, he turned, saw Eitan now untying his bag and pulling out one capsule, that he quickly began to unscrew before popping it open and displaying the interior — darkness, inky — and a deep, herbal smell. Ground, charred frankincense. Azazel snatched it in an instant, eyes wide. “Paints—”

“I made you more,” Eitan laughed. He opened another capsule — this one of grounded malachite — and then a third one, which was sifted henna leaves that had been mixed into some water to create a paste. “I went through a lot of trouble to find out what might work, but learning was fun. I hope that you like them.”

Azazel's heart ached. He was so happy that he was frowning, and his eyebrows curved. Setting the first container down, he whispered, “I can't believe this. This is incredibly kind of you. Thank you—”

Eitan was smiling toothily. “I hope they're not too terrible to work with. I really want to know how you used to paint your face. I keep imagining it, and it scares me. You're already beautiful. I think the Earth would stop if you looked any more beautiful than you already do—”

The angel kissed him. Azazel did it so abruptly, he hadn't even realized he did it. He lunged, threw his arms around him, put his mouth on his, and the sensation was chapped and dry, but there was a little softness too. And he began moving his lips, hunting for more of the tender parts of the man's mouth. Eitan was quick to do the same. The man wrapped a tight hold around him, and Azazel smiled at all the touching, as he pressed himself further against him, wanting to feel his more malleable torso against his own. Between the wet smacks of their lips, there was the sound of their tunics rubbing against each other,

then their legs, their knees, bumping. Azazel reached for the man's hair, felt the threads at his fingers.

And then they fell — onto the grass. Azazel was, first, beneath him, but then their legs hooked and caught one another, and they twisted around. The moment he was above, Azazel put a hand on the man's chest, feeling the strength and swell of him, the rises and dips of his breaths. Breaking away, gasping, the angel trembled, stirring as if from sleep, but then Eitan kissed him once more, and Azazel's mind hazed from all the sweet touches, the mouth on his own, the unbearable addiction of affection and Eitan's hands finding him, one hugging his waist and the other holding the angel's burning cheek.

The moon was above, with its watchful eye too close. Desperate, Azazel craved to keep falling with Eitan, to fall so deep they'd plunge into the heat of the Earth. He felt he needed this more. He felt this was too much. He felt the conflict of his heart tearing him in half, and he thought he needed to die, needed to die this instant. But if an angel could die — 'let him suffocate to death, kissing a man.'

When they broke apart, Azazel was heaving, and he looked down at Eitan and his halo of green beneath the night sky. The sight was pain, in Azazel's throat, as if it were clenching so tight he was tearing it from within. He felt his heart begin to flutter in whatever was opposite to the rosy feelings that had just invaded him. He moved, off of Eitan, stumbled to stand, heard the crunch of grass beneath his feet. Then, a tree was against his back, and from his mouth, he spilled, "I'm—" Eitan stared at him, disheveled.

The memory of the last mouth on his. 'The hands holding my hands, his body over mine, his lips dragging down to my neck, then lower, my chest, my stomach.' And then he had sinned, had turned dirty, had become undeserving of God's love. He remembered: 'Samyaza, so angry there were tears in his eyes, his voice choking,' then, 'my knees on the floor before God, and my hitched voice, torn up and coming apart at the seams to form something of a weak-threaded apology.' The feeling of being unraveled was in both the past and present, like he was being wound off a spool and left without a body.

"Forgive me," Azazel said, and then he ran away.

CHAPTER 14



What will I do now?’ Samyaza thought the next time the woman kissed him. ‘What now?’ He would wander away from her touch and find himself instantly missing it, and he would raise a hand to his chest, his brows furrowed in confusion at the flame gnawing at his heart. ‘I want to kiss her again, but I shouldn’t. I will not kiss her again. I never will.’ But when he saw her again, and she approached, he shut his pale eyes to accept her lips and the scrape of her teeth.

He continued with his healing, though because the labor was less time-extensive now, he could wander and examine humanity more often, see husbands and wives, see children. When Samyaza caught a wedding, he did so through a window in Enoch’s hut, taking a moment to eat berries to help with starvation weakness. A woman in a white tunic, embroidered with simple lines at its sleeves and its bottom hem, and a man in animal furs — both donning smiles, their hands interlocked, as they walked before a cheering family.

The Watchers, before their descent to Earth, had shared some brief words about human marriage without importance; to angels, it was a mere scar of original sin. Angels didn’t marry, don’t marry, and it was good that they don’t; they are, after all, without sin, or most of them are. They do not try to tangle with another thing because they are

whole and belong to God. Samyaza could remember Azazel shouting and kicking as he dragged him to God's throne to apologize for what he'd done — sin.

And yet Samyaza watched the newly married couple stop in the middle of the dirt road and share a kiss, like he had done with a woman named Idith. And shame overwhelmed him, killed him, made his stomach churn emptily, his face cringe. 'What is amiss with me? Am I becoming a sinner?' He kept thinking of Azazel. His housemate, the angel who once painted his eyes with kohl, made to kneel before God and beg because he'd dirtied himself for eternity. 'Please forgive me too, God.' Samyaza watched the newly-wedded step into their hut. 'Forgive me, forgive me.' But maybe if Azazel had married the angel before he was bedded by him, maybe if angels married, maybe it would have been different. 'Lord, you know my heart. You will understand. Bless you, Lord.'

A full moon came, then went, and Azazel traveled to the river for some water to drink, cupping the cold, crystalline body in his hands, then bringing it to his mouth with a frustrated throb knocking on the sides of his head. When he heard feathered flapping behind, then the thump of feet on rocks, he reasoned it was any Watcher Samyaza had sent after him. And he thought of Samyaza, of how Raphael had asked him to take care of him. 'But who will take care of me?' A familiar hand and familiar warmth on the skin of his wrist, which had cooled without the angel noticing — Azazel looked to his friend Armoni, then smiled. "Forgive me, brother. I've been lost in my head."

"It's not right for an angel to think so much," Armoni teased but then leaned to kiss Azazel's cheek. "What are you doing here? Haven't you heard that all of us Watchers have to meet at Mount Hermon immediately?"

Azazel raised a brow. "What? Now? Every single Watcher?"

"It seems serious," Armoni said, his hand leaving him, and then he struck his wings against the air and ascended a little into the sky, the sun nearly halo-ing him. It almost made Armoni look divine, look like an angel, before Azazel realized that was exactly what they were. 'Is this how angels look to humans? Holy and perfect and loved by God?' Azazel reeled in a breath, unfurling his own wings from his back.

‘Though God does not love me. He hasn’t loved me for a million years.’

Together, they flew to Mount Hermon. Together, they searched for the place all the Watchers had gathered before, and then they searched for the boulder where they had sat — together — once. This has been where Armoni showed him the paints he’d brought for Azazel, not of particularly good quality. Like Eitan has also done. Lowering to sit, Azazel thought of the man’s gift now, abandoned in the forest after he’d run away. Or had Eitan taken them home hoping the angel changed his mind? Hoping the angel woke one morning and realized he could not live without a man to kiss him?

It was, unfortunately, true that he’d had some trouble rising in the last few weeks, since the man had kissed him — or rather, since Azazel had kissed Eitan. The hunts had continued, but Azazel would not face Eitan, would not walk him home, though they occasionally shared a glance on accident. Azazel always looked away as quick as he could not muster, but not so quick that he missed the little sadness dribbling from Eitan’s eyes. It could not be worse; the man still offered him a smile and a polite salutation, extended a kind patience to him. Azazel hated that kindness. It made him want another kiss, made him like Eitan just a little more. It was awful, it was wonderful — Eitan was sweet, and it could not be worse.

Samyaza landed harshly in the midst of them, wings flapping twice like branches shaken by breeze.

Azazel leaned close to his friend and whispered, “Before you go, I want to talk.”

Armoni murmured back, “I noticed something is wrong with you.”

“Something terrible,” Azazel replied. ‘I love a man,’ he didn’t say, ‘and now the Lord will hate me. He will damn me. He will never forgive me.’

Samyaza shouted for everyone to be silent, then walked, reeling his wings into his back, seemingly scoping their meeting place, looking between the leaves for listeners, maybe to check if any child, such as Naamah, were here again. But there must’ve been no one because soon, Samyaza set himself before the angels once more. He raised his chin,

stiff in an authoritative poise still new on him. For a half-second, his eyes settled on Azazel and on Armoni, but it was just a flicker — of an emotion Azazel couldn't read.

Danel was sitting near the center, and he called, "Samyaza, why did you order us all here? Don't you think it's short-sighted to leave our humans after the demon attack? *You're* the one who said that Baal is ruthless."

Samyaza answered, "If you don't want to waste more time, then let me speak." And at this, the last murmuring angels fell silent. "But I have to begin with a confession, and I beg you don't interrupt me. Listen until I'm done speaking, and then if you want to judge me, if you want to turn away from me, do it." His voice was weak, tremulous on each syllable, cracking and almost giving way.

There was a fear in his quivering that Azazel recognized; it was like when Samyaza had shouted at him to confess his sin to God.

The leader of the Watchers declared: "I love a woman, like a husband loves his wife. Whenever I can, I go looking for her, and I kiss her, and she kisses me. I've even begun to care for her children, as if they were mine. And I've learned that her husband was not a good man and stripped her of her freedoms. I thought that what you said, Danel, was correct. The women are angels, and we angels are women. They were damned by God to kneel before man, because of the sins of one of their own. And my woman — yes, I'll call her my woman."

He breathed, unstable and torn, as Azazel stared with widened eyes, daring to hold some dirty relief in his heart because he wasn't the only one whose mouth had been taken by a human.

"I want to marry her." Samyaza grimaced in what may be been agony. "It's not right for her to soon be married to another man and suffer, and we came here, didn't we, to save the humans? To save them from damnation, we must also save them from each other. And I believe I can save her." Coughing, forcing out the tremble of his voice. "Don't try to tell me that I'm an angel, and she's a human, that I'm immortal, and she'll die. I know it. But I can love her while she's here, and perhaps God will save everyone alive today from death. And so let me say it again: I want to marry her. I will marry her. Marriage can't be a sin; I don't believe that it is. But if it is—" The words ran out of his

mouth too fast, too far. “I fear none of you will agree to this, and I alone shall pay the penalty of a great sin.”

Danel stood, so fast that it startled every angel, and his face was mean, but only for a moment before he sighed, almost exasperatedly, harshly. “You’re not alone, Samyaza. Me, I— I love a woman too. She’s unmarried, told me she never had an interest in marrying. I haven’t kissed her, but she’s told me she dreams of it.”

Azazel watched, in terror, at the two who’d been after him for thousands of years over sin, now admitting that they wanted to love, that they were immediately weak to amorous touches and confessions of desire.

Another angel, named Turiel, spoke next: “I almost defiled myself with a woman. One of those who weave with me and whom I’ve become so close to in these past few months. I’ve kissed her but only on the cheek.” Then, many angels were confessing, saying they had suffered flutters in their bellies, and fevers from sweet human touches. They, too, had seen marriage, watched with a hole of longing in their chest.

At this, Samyaza said, “Then this can’t be wrong. This can’t be sin.” Azazel almost gasped, furious, not understanding; he wanted to storm over, grab the angel and kick him down the mountain because he knew it was sin; he knew God would not forgive them. “And I feel this is motivated by love.”

“Let us all,” said Kokabiel, speaking with the usual aloof tone but sharpened like a sword, “swear an oath.” He was crouched on a branch, oddly not near Baraqiel, who was sitting on a log. “And bind ourselves by our mutual imprecations not to abandon this plan.” Then, his knowing giggle, of some secret knowledge the stars must have lent to him, but many of the Watchers cheered at his words, climbing to stand.

‘Fool!’ Azazel wanted to cry. ‘You are all fools!’ He bit his tongue, his heart a thunderstorm, graying, rattling. ‘You didn’t believe that I acted out of love when I sinned, and now you’ll reap the sows of that disbelief.’

“With this,” Samyaza declared, “let’s take the love offered to us. I think it’s God’s will.”

Azazel could take this no longer; he rose to his feet and took some

steps forward, calling, "Samyaza, aren't you thinking!?" But the chief of the Watchers looked away, and he waved a hand, dismissing the angels who were turning to the ruined angel of body painting and snickering. His cheeks were hot, and Azazel didn't know if the heat came from his shock or fury. "Look at me, Samyaza! Do you think God will forgive you?"

"This is not sin," Samyaza replied, still refusing to face him, stepping past some angels. "And God has nothing to forgive me for."

Danel crept toward Azazel and, laughing, said, "What is it? Are you jealous that we'll be marrying our loves while you whored for an angel and committed an abomination?"

Azazel opened his mouth to snarl and spit, but he felt a familiar hand come down on his shoulder, grip it tight, then wrench him back. "Azazel," came Armoni's voice, sharp as the dagger at Azazel's waist. "Come." He gnawed on his bottom lip, trying to keep it from trembling or coming down in a vicious yell. Staggering backward, he allowed Armoni to pull him away, and he saw many of the Watchers glowering, chuckling at him, including Danel who soon turned and went to stand by where Samyaza was, by Baraqiel.

"Your willful ignorance will do you no favors before God!" Azazel couldn't resist spitting, and finally, Samyaza dared look at him over his shoulder, though his pale eyes were desperate, strained between frustration and anger and specs of terror. Unrelenting, Armoni continued dragging him, entering deeper into the forest with Azazel. He was becoming more familiar with it — the forest; it was still a beast, large and unknowable, but it was becoming a familiar unknowingness. Like God almost. 'Perhaps that's sacrilegious.' But now everything seemed sacrilegious — Samyaza's words, Azazel's desires, everything that had taken place on this Earth.

The angel of virtue stopped them by a tree, releasing Azazel instantly. "Did you know Samyaza would do this?"

"No!" Azazel hadn't meant to shout, and he immediately, frowned, dipping his head. "Forgive me, Armoni." He noticed, now, that the blonde had his hair out of the usual large braid and was dressed in a short, embroidered tunic that must've been the style of the people he was safeguarding. "Are you like the others? Do you want to marry?"

Armoni hummed. There was something of his gaze that seemed worn, like a pair of clothes. He parted his rosy lips, then shut them again, then he said, "Not even a little." Sighing. "I don't think I like the women."

"What of the men?"

"The men?" Armoni twisted his eyes and head to a curious tilt, and the other angel flushed hot. "Azazel, are you interested in a man?"

"Is it wrong?" Azazel inched away. "What's wrong with liking a man?"

Armoni replied, "Well, it depends on the type of man. But I see it's been mostly women with an interest in angels. I suppose it's because they think we're men."

"Hm?" Azazel now raised a brow. "Why do you say that?"

"We use the same titles as their men, say *he* and say *brother*."

"But we're not men," Azazel said. "And those are our words. We made them first."

"But they're not our words anymore," Armoni replied, then laughed briskly. "Can't you see it? The men are the most important creatures to God now."

Hesitatingly, wearily, Azazel asked, "Armoni, is something wrong?"

The other angel answered, "I don't like the humans. I want to go home. We don't belong here. I miss Dina." Immediately, Azazel flinched. "He's alone. I imagine all the angels are being cruel to him while we Watchers are here with all those women hungry to defile us." He paused, then added, "Don't forget your original sin, Azazel."

Almost offended — "Don't forget *yours*." They hadn't discussed this in thousands of years, but he said, "You turned in angels to be tortured to save yourself. I've stood by your side since you asked God for forgiveness, and I trust in you, but sometimes it does feel as if you only care for your own well-being."

Armoni breathed, then turned his face away from the other slowly, branches above them rustling. "And you asked God for forgiveness after letting an angel put his cock in you. And now you want the cock of a man?" The words may as well have been a slap in the face — Azazel even jolted — but Armoni's voice came once more, softer, kinder. "You almost fell because you're too weak for love. This time, I'm afraid no

one will catch you." He looked back at him, reached, stroked Azazel's cheek with a finger.

"It wasn't love, last time," Azazel whispered, "but with this man, it is."

"Do you promise me that?"

"Yes."

"Do you believe God will forgive this?"

"I worry about your judgment more than I do God's."

"Then let me not judge you," Armoni said. "I've never wanted to be God." He kissed his cheek, then began walking once more. "Come. Tell me about your man." Azazel faltered in following, but he had nothing to do but sigh and begin moving.

Azazel began, "He made paints for me."

"Then you should wear them."

It was hours later that Eitan the man was sat on the dirt outside his home, sharpening his weapons and sighing. He set one down, raising an arm to drag against the perspiration clinging to his brow. Over his hips and groin, he had a cloth tied loosely, his torso exposed to the moonlight and the crickets, the distant hisses of great tigers, and the groans of greater sloths. Eitan trekked his gaze toward the feet of the mountain in the darkness, breathing in the chilled wind. From here, Mount Hermon appeared smaller, like it couldn't eat him, but it also seemed larger. Whenever he ventured inside with the hunters, he only ever focused on the leaves and spindly branches right before him for his own sake. He thought that if you were trapped in a beast's stomach, you could never know the full body of the monster — and that was a comfort, the same way it was a horror.

"Man."

Eitan turned, placing his sweat-stained palms over the dry ground. And he met an angel, standing before a scene of stars, a creamy wave of light over the dark sea, and a crescent moon right by his head, as if he only had half a halo. "Azazel?" He climbed onto his feet, but as he did, he saw that the angel wore the same long tunic as when they'd met, but now there was fur on him, a draped hide of a bear over his shoulders, falling to his ankles. He wore ruby over his collarbone, a gold chain over his dark skin. Along his eyes, there were lines of black pigment,

accentuating the crevices and lines, and his lips were red. "Angel." He was perfect, and Eitan couldn't make sense of something so divine.

Azazel stepped forward, taking Eitan's hand, and he sighed shakily. He slipped his fingers between his, letting their palms press together. He said, "I'm sorry for not speaking to you. I'm sorry for being a coward."

"You're beautiful," said the man.

"Is it love," asked the angel, "that you have for me?"

The response was stammering: "Oh, I'm— I'm just a man, and we've never been good with love, but I think that's what I have, or what I'm looking for when I speak to you." He coughed some. "And I've only ever loved men. Angels, well— Are you a man?"

Azazel hesitated. "I think that I am." He nodded to himself. "I can't speak for other angels, but I'm definitely not a woman." He didn't know any too well. "So I must be a man." He had no other choice. "But— Ah, I was in the forest earlier with my friend, searching for your paints until we found them. I'm wearing them now. Thank you." He stared at their hands. "All the angels here are in love. They talked about it on the mountain. They even want to marry."

"Do you want to marry?"

Azazel didn't answer that. "I loved in the past, and it almost cast me down from Heaven, and I don't think that angel ever loved me the way I thought he did. I know you loved in the past too."

"Love is difficult and painful," replied Eitan, laughing a little, "but if we try to avoid pain all our lives, we'll never live and we'll never love either." He leaned closer, smiling. "Since we kissed — I've been thinking that I'm no good for an angel. Still, I would like to try, if you allow me. I would try every day until my last one on this damn Earth."

Azazel licked his lips, then murmured, "My friend told me about how you humans only marry as deals for children."

"Yes," the man affirmed.

"Well, if I were to marry, it would be for love."

"If you married me, it could be for love." Eitan chuckled, tugging on the angel's wrist, pulling him into a great, hefty kiss that parted Azazel's mouth in a happy laugh against his own. "If you married me,

my grandmother could bless you. All my family would love you.” With every word, his lips lapped at him. “How dry are those paints?”

Azazel, yet again, tittered. “Very dry.”

“I’ll try again for you.” Eitan kissed him again, slower, deeper, and Azazel made a welcoming, soft noise, feeling the worries of the day water until they dripped off entirely. “Now, come. Come with me inside.”

Azazel felt his heart stumble, frightened; he knew the sensation of warmth and coiling in his lower belly, and he whispered, “Into your home?”

Eitan’s gaze softened. “Are you scared?”

Breathing in, then firmly — “No.”

And Azazel hurried inside with him, following the man to a lofted mat, draped in a cloth sheet and moonlight streaming from a square, small window far above. Together, they sat, but soon swerved toward one another to kiss again, Azazel touching Eitan’s hand, and gasping into the man’s mouth, beginning to feel joy in the shape of fire and wings within him, in the shape of an angel before his God.

Eitan crawled backward, further onto the bedding, and Azazel moved after him, stumbling onto his lap and tilting his face to press a kiss to the man’s jaw. He lingered on the coarseness of Eitan’s dark beard, pale in some strands, then experimentally rubbed his cheek against it, only to smile wistfully at the scratching against his skin. Laying a hand on Eitan’s chest, feeling the hair there too, Azazel thought, ‘Maybe God was inspired when he made man. You’re all too beautiful.’ Every mole on his skin, every scar that lightened it, every red patch, all the odd things.

Azazel pecked his flat nose, and then he reached for the cloth over his groin, untying it. What he found beneath had already turned firm, but he touched it as if it were softy tender — the man gasped like it was — and allowed his fingers to follow the curve, from base to tip. The raised, crooked lines along the skin were like roots, from flower, from tree. He took the flesh, in two loose fists, and the man shuddered and drew air in again, sharper. The more he stroked, the tougher it grew — it grew, though not much — and Azazel was not really stroking but

playing. He played with it, squeezing and smiling, like it would help the warm, but welcome, rousing between his own legs.

Azazel lowered his face and tugged on the skin to press a sweet kiss to the exposed peak, beading salty droplets already, dabbing his lips like dew. It shuddered, then — the hardness — against his lips like a flower whispering; this flesh here was like a flower, the pistil of hibiscus. Smiling, Azazel lifted his gaze, saw Eitan staring widely, face flushed, sweat on his brow, his eyes wide and afraid. ‘Are you scared of me suddenly?’ The angel kissed the man’s pleasure again, then he tugged the skin back once more. ‘Maybe I’m scared too,’ but his heart was singing; he was the one doing the touching this time, and the night was calm.

‘No war, no violence.’ He suckled, trying to draw out some taste. ‘Maybe you can really love me. I might be able to love you.’ He wanted to live. ‘I want to know to love.’ Eitan’s moans were weak and fractured, his hips stuttering. ‘I couldn’t find love in Heaven, in the kisses of an angel. Maybe I’m better fit for the arms of a man.’

Azazel surged to take Eitan’s mouth again, and the man embraced him tight, as Azazel gripped his own tunic at his hips and wound up the cloth hurriedly before the man’s hands clasped over his knuckles. Pressing forward, taking the reins of the kiss, Eitan gripped Azazel’s clothing for himself, then reeled it up over the angel’s head. Naked they both suddenly were, and breathing, and Eitan stared curiously at Azazel’s, at an angel’s, body. He touched, and Azazel bit down a noise, high and nervous, before he shuddered in a nearly-unknown pleasure. He took the man’s hand quickly, wanting to bargain his control back. He readjusted on the man’s lap, turning his body to face adjacent to him, and he pressed his thighs as close as he could with the man’s cock snugly in between.

Then, the angel reached to play with the tip that peeked out. Rubbing a palm over it, smearing like paint — then placing a thumb on him and kneading circles, as if to coax him, to make him come loose. ‘It’s throbbing.’ He felt it against his thighs. ‘You pulse like a heart. Hearts between our legs. I can feel mine beating by yours. Be kind to it.’

When they kissed again, Azazel tasted like Eitan. And as he shifted his body, he reached and worked in a finger, wet from the man’s

beading and leaking. Obediently, Azazel took Eitan's index to slide against his tongue when it'd prodded at his bottom lip, and he suckled, spit on it, before the finger was pulled, dripping, out of his mouth, then lowered. Both of them coaxed his entrance, like too many spears into a hunted animal. At the same time, Eitan was delicate with him.

Sinking down, finally, finally, Azazel remembered just how much of a mortal his new love was. He took Eitan's hand and guided it to try and tease out a little more pleasure from his front. Eitan was just a human, after all, and Azazel knew they weren't really meant for one another, not made for each other, made of flesh never meant to mix. But Azazel raised his hips, then fell back into place, and a hitched noise escaped his throat that felt right despite how wrong this all might be to God, who was surely watching.

Azazel shut his eyes. He didn't want to rebel; he couldn't claim innocence this time. 'Forgive me, God.' He cried out again, and Eitan grunted with him as they began to move, together like moon and tide, like instrument and song. Inching away, then drawing back together again, striking, beating. Beating, like a heart. Their rhythm like a pulse. 'I might be your worst angel.' He did not cry, did not allow this to be like the first time despite the rush of guilt.

When they slept, the angel and the man were so tangled together, they thought they'd never come apart again.

CHAPTER 15



When Baraqiel visited his friend Kokabiel, one midnight, in the marsh by a lake, he told him there had been a few weddings among the nine Watchers he looked over. Some were quite public with their ceremonies, some were very private. Many hurried to build a hut together as was tradition, and some others would move into the homes of the families they had joined themselves with, speak with the grandparents, and learn their new responsibilities. After he said this, he had hesitated, then turned to Kokabiel, who was staring directly at the moon, grin in its usual wide-ness. “Kokabiel?” He heard him laugh a little. “Are the stars speaking to you?” He placed a fluttering touch on his arm, but the angel of stars was cold.

Baraqiel arrived in Enoch’s village a few days after that.

“Oh!” Samyaza saw him almost instantly, his head jutting out of the entrance to a small hut some minutes from the center. “Baraqiel, I’m over here. Come inside. I’m happy you arrived so early.” Gesturing, he welcomed the angel of light into a small, circular space, where there were two plain hammocks and a lofted mat; Idith was also there, crouched by a hole in the ground and preparing a fire. “Do you want to discuss the message?”

“I’m sorry,” Baraqiel said. “I’m actually here to decline. I can’t be a

messenger for you, brother. I won't return to Heaven and tell them what's happening here."

The leader of the Watchers was quiet, Idith's humming filling the silence. She was pretending not to listen, though Samyaza wasn't sure why; why would he mind that she listen? "Brother." He took a weak breath. "Why not?"

Baraquel whispered, "If I return, they'll call me a whore. Like they did Azazel."

"No." Samyaza tensed. "If you— This is different. We're doing this for love. When Adam and Eve were in the garden, the Lord told them to be fruitful, to multiply."

"That isn't telling them to love," Baraquel said, but this time even softer, his eyes sad. "That's telling them to make children." He looked at Idith, then he called out to her, "Are you his wife?"

Idith's head jerked upward at them, then she tugged down on her dress, flushing, standing. "Yes." Samyaza didn't say a word. He hadn't proposed to Idith quite yet, and hearing her be referred to as his wife only made him keenly aware that he had yet to do what many other angels had done, despite being the instigator.

Baraquel said, "Well, I don't believe us angels can have children with you, so I fear we're acting against God."

Idith looked at Samyaza, as if waiting for him to argue on her behalf, but Baraquel had addressed her, so they both simply waited for her to respond. And she did, though lacking her usual assurance, "The way I see it, this was inevitable. Us humans — we fall in love very quickly."

"Fall?" Samyaza echoed. It was the first time he'd heard love to be a *fall*.

"Yes," Idith answered him, then looked to Baraquel again. "If God allowed you here, He must've known what would happen." She grasped Samyaza's hand, squeezed his finger, and added, "Well, I don't know."

Samazaya inhaled deep before he told Baraquel, "You don't have anything to be ashamed of. Speak to Gabriel. I'm sure he'll understand. Who is your wife?"

"I don't have one," said Baraquel. "At least not yet." He swallowed,

then turned away. “It was an angel I spoiled myself with.” He left quickly, after that.

Samyaza didn’t pursue, and he decided not to send an angel up to Heaven, after all.

Time passed, more angels married. At the next meeting at Mount Hermon, Danel brought his new wife, a woman as fierce as him, who even lent her wisdom in understanding the coming harvest season. In return, they told her that in Heaven, there’s always harvest, and she smiled greatly, replying that she couldn’t wait to enter the city of God herself, which her lovely angel spouse had helped build. At this, Danel had blushed deeply. And the next time there was a meeting, yet another Watcher brought his wife. She told them about animal migration cycles; they told her about the moon’s darker side.

Enoch, of course, approached Samyaza one day. He did it with one of his great-grandsons, a man named Noah, and stomping beneath the sizzling sun of noon. He called, “Angel!”

Samyaza had been healing the sprain on a child’s wrist, dabbing water from the bowl he often used, when he raised his head. “One moment.” Quickly, he moved to finish, soothing the last of the swelling, then lifting himself from his crouch. He told the little girl, “Now don’t fall on it again.” Laughing, the girl thanked him, sniffling away the last of her pain, before hurrying to jog in the direction of some other children. The angel smiled broadly before facing the elder — “Enoch, how are you?” — but he saw the furrow in the old man’s brow, and then he heard his low, rumbled sigh. “What’s wrong?”

“I hear many of you angels have decided to marry our women.”

‘Our?’ Samyaza looked between Enoch and the older man at his side, who was staring at the horizon, frowning. “Yes. Forgive me. I know you’re the leader of this tribe, but I wasn’t aware you were involved in marriages.”

“Don’t you,” Enoch began, then coughed, then laughed. “Don’t you angels have your own women?”

Samyaza took half a step back, throat drying. “No. In Heaven, there are no women. And there are no men either. We’re only angels.” He noted the older man look over at them curiously, but Samyaza focused his attention on the elder. “If our marriage upsets you, I apologize, but

we are both creations of God, and if the women are happy with us, then I don't see what could be wrong."

"The women are sinners," Enoch said. "Look around you, Samyaza. You've seen how us humans suffer." He raised three fingers to pad his left eyebags. "For years, I couldn't see. I lost my wife. I've lost children. Every day, we must hunt for food and grow it, and we go to sleep so often hungry. You saw how the demons are free to hurt us. Had it not been for the simplemindedness of women, we could be in paradise with our Creator. All women carry the sin of the first mother. They carry her wickedness. Do you understand how they will ruin you angels, how they have ruined us men?"

The angel could only stare, his face twisting and twisting in bewilderment. "All I understand is that you're pretending to know the will of God or the intricacies of His creation. What gives you the authority to speak falsehoods on women?"

"They were damned to serve us men."

"And so were us angels," Samyaza snapped, "but I won't bow for wicked men, and I won't let a woman do it either." He turned on his heel, and he began to walk, noticing a few humans staring with a Watcher among them, holding a child at his hip. Maybe, it was the daughter of the woman he married, maybe a child that was his now too.

After him, Enoch bellowed: "They say the devil put his seed in the first woman! And now all women carry his wickedness!" Samyaza didn't respond. "You will see! You see how women will damn you like they did to us men!"

That night, Samyaza told Idith this. He helped her fold the clothes she'd spent all day washing for the four of her children, three daughters and one toddler of a boy. Outside, there were crickets, faraway calls — the usual noises of night — in between his huffing and grumbles. He glared at his own feet, repeating what Enoch had said, then speaking his own mind, "How could he say something so wrong, something he couldn't possibly be sure about?"

Idith hummed, holding the small tunic of a daughter to her chest. "That's how men are, Samyaza, dear. I've heard this all my life. My own father would say it to me, and it was worse because I was his only

daughter. Men are cruel. At least the demons will simply kill you and leave.”

“I don’t understand them! These men!”

“I’ve been wanting to ask,” her voice came much quieter. “About your sex.”

Samyaza turned to her, raised a brow. “My what?”

“I’m sure you’ve noticed it,” she said, “but us women and men, we look different. We’re built differently, to do different things. But you angels — you use words like you’re men. So, I thought maybe you have the parts of a man.”

Samyaza realized now what she meant, but he felt sharp needles at his throat, then his spine — a bleeding discomfort. “Well—” He glanced around, realizing they were alone, that Idith’s children must be with her mother, something not unusual, but now it felt planned, and Samyaza looked at the walls of the hut, so far and so close at once, caving in.

“I thought you wanted to marry me,” Idith said, “is all. I thought —” She laughed nervously, setting aside the clothes, then brushing off her dress, which Samyaza noticed was dyed and, thus, one of her better ones. Around her neck — there was her bone necklace; he began to wonder where she got it, who had been killed for it. “Humans usually make love, after marriage. You do want to make love to me, right?”

“Yes,” Samyaza said without thinking. “I love you.” His voice trembled, his hands trembled.

“But I notice you haven’t made any advances.”

“I wasn’t aware I was supposed to.”

She laughed, and then she reached, touched his bicep, and got on her toes to kiss his cheek. “You’re so nervous, Samyaza. I understand how this looks, but we don’t have to do anything you don’t like. If you’re scared, then I’m not interested in touching you.”

Samyaza forced out a sigh, but it was weak as he looked away from her, feeling his body heavy, feeling like he needed to curl up over the ground and hide his face from God. “No. I was only—” He thought of what Enoch had said. “I was waiting for the right time.”

“You angels are used to having all the time that there is,” Idith said. “But us humans have so little.” She leaned her head against his shoul-

der. "Though if I have to spend all of my life waiting for this from you, I'll accept that too. Maybe I haven't recognized the privilege of waiting on a nervous, beautiful angel, and I can see that he's really trying."

Samyaza thought of her husband, long gone now. "I won't make you wait eternity for me." He turned his head, brushed her mouth with his own. It drew a warm breath out of her, then she leaned forward, pressed her body against his. "Teach me how you humans do it." He trembled. "I can try."

There was something sad in Idith's eyes, as if she were now regretting this, but she continued. She had Samyaza lay on the hard mat, then working to undress him, saying she hadn't been sure what she expected. Samyaza simply leaned back on his elbows, trying to clear his mind of any thoughts as she touched him. Her hand was nimble, quick, but he couldn't stop shaking. His eyes burned when he felt a little pleasure, and his legs jerked at every instance. Though he felt a warmth inside like he never had — it wasn't the lovely sensation he'd hoped for. Arousal was a furnace, and he was trapped inside, and he was clawing at the door, shrieking for someone to let him out.

Suddenly, Samyaza hiccuped, surging forward and shutting his eyes but not quick enough to stop the droplets from leaking. He clenched his teeth, but his crying tangled in his throat, suffocating him so much that he had no choice but to open his mouth again and let out a choked gargle. In his fists, he grappled the sheet over the mat.

"Oh no, no, no," Idith was saying, and Samyaza felt his head be pulled to her chest. "Don't cry." A drawl of pained murmurs fell from his lips — about his purity, about the Lord not forgiving him, but he was mostly unintelligible in his fear. "I'll take care of you. And God will forgive you." But Samyaza whined like an animal, and he asked if she could just continue; 'I'm already in discomfort. If I stop now, I'll never try again.' He felt himself be gripped, then guided. 'God, forgive her.' When the inside of her engulfed him, he felt chewed, swallowed. 'I already know that you won't forgive me.'

Samyaza kissed her again, tasting the salt of his own tears, then felt fury at himself for feeding her his sadness. Her movements on him were slow and deliberate, like trying to massage him, but every pleasurable pull of his body was interlaced with too much shame turning

agony. When his eyes fell shut, he saw an abyss, and he could hardly hear her breaths, fading into the noises of the forever loud Earth. Briefly, he wondered what else made love that night — angels with women, angels with angels.

When finished, he felt gutted out, empty, and dead. But he was not, and he was held, and he nuzzled the throat of Idith and had no choice but to lay there grieving for what he'd just lost. Scared of what his body was doing, angry as drought and miserable as flood; he blamed himself. He had half the mind to fear God and half the mind to fear Idith, that either one or the other wouldn't love him now, or maybe both. Except, his wife held him tight, telling him that sleep would help. After she lost her virginity, she said, she'd also wanted to dream for the rest of her life.

Then, the moon fell, and the sun rose, and then another day was forced on them. The sun fell, the moon rose. The days would not stop, were merciless and harsh in their constant coming.

Azazel felt this from the place where he had now made something of a home — Eitan's side of the village. He met all his cousins, and his grandmother, and his sisters, brothers, nephews, nieces, even Naamah. They didn't call him Eitan's husband — they didn't dare utter the words — but they appeared to understand the place Azazel now held in Eitan's life, and they accepted it silently. "It's not unlike," Eitan told him one sunset, as they were walking back home from a hunt, "my old lover. We built this hut together, and my family watched us. I thought they would confront us, but they never did."

Azazel turned to him and smiled. "I hope his soul doesn't mind us being together."

"Having known him," Eitan chuckled, deep and loud over the murmurs of the other hunters dispersing behind them. "I think he'd be jealous he can't join us."

Azazel smiled and thought to kiss him, but he stepped away. "I have to leave you now. Samyaza called for another gathering of the Watchers. I should be back soon, so please try to survive until then."

"I won't," teased Eitan. "You'll come back, and you'll find my bloodied body right there."

"What a shame," Azazel joked back at him, waving as he stepped

away from him. “Goodbye now.” He moved through a breeze that was growing cooler than it had in the last months. It had been months now, after all. And though Azazel still thought of Heaven, he now imagined returning with this man at his side, curling up with him in a proper, plush bed.

Stretching his wings, he launched himself into the sky with a strike of the blue feathers, up higher into where the air grew even colder and thinner — scaling the mountain, taking her in. Azazel saw, as he approached, that the Watchers had now set up sideways tree trunks and gathered stones to keep them from rolling to any one side. At the center, they had set a bonfire, which raged and cast a shadow on Samyaza, who stood beside it, with the bone-necklace woman. He seemed nervous, his brows twitching, which Azazel caught just as he landed just some steps from the flames. Simultaneously, he noticed that there were plenty of other women, perhaps almost as many as there were Watchers. Frowning, then, Azazel made his way to the leader of the Watchers. “Samyaza?”

Samyaza jolted, almost comically, then turned to Azazel. “Oh. You’re here.” His gaze skittered from him, to the woman at his side, then he said, quickly: “Azazel, this is Idith. She’s my wife. I married her.”

She stood there, beautiful and aged, with a gap between her front teeth and her curly hair smothered beneath a thin scarf. Hesitantly, the woman pulled a smile onto her mouth and nodded at Azazel. “It’s nice to meet you. I see you’re as beautiful as angels can be. Samyaza has mentioned you to me plenty.”

Azazel also found himself unsure, but he did eventually lift his hand, outstretch it, and feel her palm against his. “Thank you very much.” His cheeks were warm. “You’re very beautiful yourself.”

“Part of the reason I called this meeting,” said Samyaza, as if he’d predicted exactly what Azazel had been about to wonder, “is to discuss how marriage has gone for each of you. I was especially curious about you, Azazel. When we met with everyone, you didn’t mention a woman. You haven’t found love?” Idith laughed a little, seeming to think this was a joke, but Azazel wasn’t smiling, and Samyaza had an edge to his tone.

“Samyaza,” Azazel said again, dropping his hand. “Come with me. I want to talk.”

The leader of the Watchers glanced at his wife, then at everyone — the women and the angels laughing and telling one another the secrets of their worlds. “Will it be quick?” Azazel promised it would. “Be true to that.” He touched his wife’s hand, saying wordlessly that she should stay there, and then he stepped forward, and so did Azazel.

There was no need to travel very far, just toward some crowded trees. They set themselves behind one, Samyaza crossing his arms, looking at him expectantly. Azazel, lowering his voice, made his confession: “Samyaza, I need to tell you that I haven’t taken on a wife.”

Samyaza nodded but, oddly, seemed relieved. “I see. Well, there’s no reason you should have dragged me here to tell me that. The way you made it sound, I thought you were going to tell me you married a man.” He chuckled, but again, Azazel wasn’t smiling, and this wasn’t a joke. Quieter, quieter, Samyaza’s amusement waned, then he began, “Azazel—”

The ground shook, so sudden it made them stagger in place. And a flash of light followed — more red than white — and a second after that, a *boom*. Throwing them back, striking the woods, blowing out their fire, and a ring shocking Azazel’s ears so sharp that he couldn’t hear his yell — it was a ferocious, mighty blare. Azazel felt air around him, as if he were flying — and he remembered how he’d fallen off a ladder once, in Heaven. He didn’t reel out his wings like then, though there was the initial impulse; he let himself fall, let himself crash against the ground and roll over the earth without struggle.

But the shock was quick. Azazel was over the dirt for just a moment, wheezing at the pain that had slammed into his back and head and scrapped both arms, dragging over tough stone and sharp twigs. He swung back up, stumbling to his feet, gasping. His hand went over his chest, feeling his heart attempt to knock down his sternum. Encircling him — the groans of angels and that of women, on the ground or trying to stand up like him, the trembling trees, some birds falling, splattering. Azazel blinked, wading through the spots of his vision, seeing Samyaza and then hearing him — orders. Shouting —

stay in place, gather yourself, stay in place. Before him, the chief of the Watchers was wobbling to rise.

There was smoke, gray in the sheen of the night sky. Now, Azazel revealed his wings, beating them strongly once, twice, lifting himself above the tree canopy. "Azazel!" Samyaza rushed after him, telling him to stay behind to help the women instead, but once they had both risen high enough, their breaths caught, as if on the burning itself.

And Samyaza whispered, "Baal. He did this."

Together, they looked upon a village plunged — in flames, in the serpent of smoke that slithered up from its inferno-body. From here, the shrieks; they could see the humans, running or in remains, burning orange, yellow. And, from the fire, yet another creature rose — in silver armor that caged each limb, in gold helmet that obscured both eyes, in cloak once-charcoal now tinted by blood — a fierce sword in one hand — all wings so colored and great that they could have made up the Earth.

"Michael," Azazel whispered.

CHAPTER 16



What is there to say of Michael, the chief prince of Heaven, the absent archangel?

Since the war, he hadn't fallen, though many angels would come to believe he did. In the rubble, they looked for him. They had just returned to counting days, weeks, months, but they hadn't found him beneath any debris, nor in his home, which was no longer a home — too desolate and fallen into pieces of wall, floor, stair. The prince's closest friend, Phanuel, was completely silent, and for all the angels looked, Michael and his bloody hands were gone from paradise. In this quiet, the angels began to whisper that perhaps Michael had fallen too, and he was making a fine wreck of life with his Lucifer.

'They must be,' thought an angel, 'dancing, in the scorch of the Earth — the devil and the archangel. They must pride in that apocalyptic lust that damned them. They must be ruling together with all the other beasts at their command, like their own creations, their children.'

Beneath the moon, Azazel and Samyaza, all the Watchers with them, were frantically making their way back to the settlement. They'd left the women behind, far from the flames that they were now

approaching, much greater than the mere couple fires the demons had once cast. These wholly embraced the angels' surroundings, burning away on the bodies and blood already littered over the ground, as well as on the blur of screaming, running flames that may have obscured a scorching person beneath. And, soon, they saw that the chief prince was not alone.

One day, Michael had returned to Heaven, but unspeaking, unwavering in the stoic touch over his face. When the angels saw him — his bare feet on a half-repaired road, his body in a loose, pure white robe — they worriedly asked where he'd been. But Michael did not open his mouth, and the angels grew angrier, offended; one in the crowd took a rock and flung it, calling him dirty and defiled. They said Michael had allowed Lucifer to tempt him into sin. He had been weak. The fall of Heaven had been his fault. And then Michael was gone again. He began to feel truer in their fantasies — an angel who had fallen after his beloved friend to rule eternal torment — rather than the shadow of a ghost prince in Heaven.

Once more, Michael appeared before them, looming above any other, without any foretelling annunciation. At each side, two angels beat their wings slow, armored like their chief prince, and wielding hefty swords just the same, and as the Watchers crept closer, Michael gestured outward with his weaponless hand. His silver gauntlet made a motion like it was grabbing, then crushing in a fist. At this, Samyaza shouted something Azazel couldn't quite hear beneath the blare of disorder — the crumble of huts, the crackles and hisses, the wails of people who had months ago survived another attack — but he saw the angels at Michael's sides suddenly scatter, flying each in different directions.

"Michael!" yelled Samyaza, this time Azazel hearing it crystalline. "What are you doing?!"

Azazel's gaze followed one of the angels heading over the path to Eitan's home. In a shock of terror, he felt his blood fever and boil as he caught, too, a hundred scrambling humans with their shrieking children, their elderly parents, and their howling pets. They were all sprinting toward the river, but Michael's angel was quickly, danger-

ously, approaching. Without thinking, Azazel snapped at Samyaza, “I’ll go after that one!” He didn’t waste any second in waiting for a response, instead striking his wings against the breeze as tough as he could, as fast. Azazel didn’t dare look behind him, not even to see if the chief prince would pounce into a hunt for his head.

Samyaza grimaced as Azazel left his side, but he was followed by two other Watchers who darted after Michael’s angels, whereas he remained petrified where he was, staring at the thin slits where Michael’s eyes must’ve been hidden within the helmet. “Why,” he shouted once more, “are you doing this?! What have we done?” Again, the chief prince said nothing, instead gripping the chains of gold perched diagonally across his body before wrenching them off with a sharp *clink* among all the roaring noise. “Michael, what is this?!” Michael threw his chain out like a whip. And when it struck Samyaza’s side — it flung him far, so quick that the angel was feeling air rush past him before he registered even the violent shock of pain and, then, his scream.

But as this occurred, Azazel neared the sea of stampeding humans, so packed together they were near indistinguishable as anything other than one body of madness. Before Michael’s angel in the air might notice or attack, Azazel swooped lower, only for his breath to hitch when he caught a small figure tumble down into the panic, their limbs flailing as people clamored over them relentlessly. Toward them, Azazel dived, forcefully breaking the crowd with his landing and a shove of his wings to push back all the humans he could. He’d never been particularly strong, but humans were small, and Azazel quickly saw where the trampled girl was. She was curled over the dirt, gurgling, twitching, clutching her head.

Azazel took her by the arms, tugging her upward, and the girl groaned, but she didn’t resist. “Are you alright?” he asked, hurried and distraught, though he knew she wasn’t. “Please keep running. Get to the river.”

“The angels,” she choked, beginning to put a foot before the other, “why are they doing this?” Her hacking was now broken up by the gurgle of dry crying. “What have we done?”

Beneath him, Samyaza felt the flimsy wall of a hut for a fraction of a second, then he was hearing it break beneath in a booming pierce of his spine and exposed wings. The rattle of pain, the whip, the crash, thundered through his body before the ground struck him, a leg folding against it, his knee splitting, the lower bones jutting out clean through the joint in an explosion of blood over the dirt. The scream that hurled out of Samyaza's mouth almost tore up his lungs, even when two Watchers immediately ran to his aid. Another two remained near the chief prince and tried to speak, but Michael lunged at one, then at the other.

Aching and groaning, Samyaza saw the Watchers fall from the sky. Like they would have Heaven.

Azazel saw this too, staring back with large frightened eyes, waving an arm to the humans nearest him, trying to direct them all toward the river because these fires were famished, shoving everything living or dead into its maw. Yet, he knew this couldn't be safe; Michael's angel right nearby carried a chain not unlike his leader. But it was thinner, longer, and when Azazel saw him lasso it backward, it grappled a piece of the nearest burning hut. With a circling of his arm, he winded a burning debris around them, before flinging it to his left. Horrifically, the attack struck not only a portion of the crowd but a pair of huts and a stable of crying lambs.

'What is happening?' All the blood in Azazel was ice cold now. Trembling, blinking, he thought the sounds barraging him had grown fainter, the sights had grown unfocused and misted. He felt his heart, heard it in his ears, thought that it would soon begin to pump blood outside of him. 'God, did you send Michael to bring war again like he did at our judgment? Why have you done this? Is this our punishment for love?'

"Azazel! Azazel!"

The angel turned his head, looking between the crowd to see Eitan, pushing through the wave, running opposite the direction of the humans; over his shoulder, he carried a stone mallet — a feeble, delicate thing juxtaposed to the angels' weapons of war. But anger was in Azazel's chest, bubbling, blooming out and whirling like flames, like

Michael and his angels had started a fire within him too. ‘You see me love this man, God, and it angers you? Love kills you? It kills you?!’ Eitan reached him, grabbed one of his arms, shouted something that was almost drowned out by the yelling around them, but Azazel also saw that Naamah had followed, behind his husband. The sight of a child only fed the flaming in Azazel’s heart. ‘What kind of Father are you, God?’

But he knew that now was not the time to feel all this; it wasn’t long before a shadow swopped over them, and Azazel raised his chin to see the angel — wings beating tactfully to keep him in place, the end of his silver chain dropping low, nearly brushing the heads of the humans. It was enough that Azazel could grab it if he inched a little closer. Swallowing, Azazel faced Eitan, then surged forward. Taking the bristle, bearded cheeks, feeling the dry cracks on his lips, he kissed him fiercely and whispered, ‘I’ll lead him away.’ The angel tore himself back, quick.

‘What?’ Eitan breathed, then reached out desperately but the angel staggered backward.

Azazel looked to the child, who was wide-eyed, mouth parted, nose scrunched in distaste, and said, ‘Naamah,’ then inhaled deep, feeling smoke slither into his lungs, ‘don’t let him run after me.’ He turned and ran. Behind him, Eitan’s shouts trailed, like they were limbs trying to grapple the angel and stop him, but Azazel continued forward. He stretched out his wings, flapped them, and speared himself through the crowd until he’d reached the dangling chain from the angel. And, firmly, he grabbed it, felt the sear of each chainlink on his palm with a hiss, and tugged as hard as he could.

The angel above didn’t lose his grip, but he was jerked downward and sideways, which he responded to with some hectic flapping. Azazel released the chain in an instant, beating his own wings, lifting his body into the night sky, then diving at the attacker. He missed — purposefully. Azazel had the foresight to know the angel would dodge, and he was thankful for it; he’d never been much of a fighter, and he definitely wasn’t going to suddenly gain the ability to brawl, no matter how angry he was.

Hissing, the angel swerved to avoid being tackled by Azazel.

Azazel tensed, and he pretended to throw out a hard punch that the other angel once again dodged. Distantly, he heard his name — Eitan's yelling — and he was certain he had to hurry; the second his human tried to help, the angel would certainly turn his attention back to destruction. But the faux attacks worked; the angel, now with his teeth bared beneath his large helmet, reached for the sword at his back, largely abandoning the chain by winding it across his body with his other hand. With a thin groove at its side, a silver gleaming, a hilt of gold curled at the edges and engraved with vines, leaves — the angel's new, exposed weapon reminded Azazel of the designs he'd done on his kitchen cabinets. Swallowing, readying himself, he thought, 'You'll show them to Eitan one day.' He reminded himself of love to quench his anger, just enough that he could focus.

When the angel swung at him, Azazel saw his blue wings at his periphery, flapping before him, throwing him back. The angel charged again, and another time, Azazel avoided him by flying backward quick enough. After the third attempt, Azazel heard an anguished, furious grunt from the angel before him.

And then — a chase.

It was this that Azazel had been tempting, and he wasn't an incredible flyer or a terrible one, but his empty hand and lack of armor made him lighter. So he made a frightened face, flailed his arms, and kicked out his legs before he twisted and began flying as fast as he could. The *swishes* of his attackers' wings sounded close behind, and Azazel began swerving, trying to move unpredictably, pulling his legs close whenever he abruptly turned. 'As long as I get him away from my humans, then I've done what I have to.' Though the fires below were still climbing, and Azazel found himself now catching smoke in his throat that spewed out of him in hacks. He narrowed his eyes, tearing from the heat and the cinders. But, it was lonelier below — the fires were so great that anyone still here was surely dead. Azazel's heart hurt to think that death was now a comfort.

He glanced behind him but didn't stop flying; he saw how little was revealed of this angel through this golden helmet — just his lower jaw, with very narrow slits for where the eyes should be. "Why," Azazel shouted over the winds, "are you doing this?!"

The angel didn't respond.

"Why has God sent you to kill? To murder?!" Azazel saw the angel beginning to fiddle with the chain, preparing to grip it, and then he swung the sword once more. Quick to evade, Azazel turned another direction, now headed for the forest and Mount Hermon. The sigh from him was almost in relief — definitely, the crowded trees would keep the angel from whipping his chain, and so he headed there with sudden purpose, new vigor. But he didn't stop shouting: "How do you feel?! The demons came and slaughtered the humans the same as you!" There — a quiver of the angel's lips, a crack of composure. "Are you really an angel?!"

Azazel recognized him, but that was all he could tell. The familiarity of the grunts, the little breaths. But he'd met thousands of angels his entire life, and if he couldn't name the angel immediately, then he knew it was hopeless to try and remember. But — he saw some of the feathery layers of dark hair, some rings on his hands.

They approached the trees, that Azazel realized he had become familial with, the same manner that he had with Eitan's nephews and nieces and grandparents. He began to wonder if the other angel would torture him now, if he would grab Azazel and dismember him and leave him in every corner of the Earth so that he'd spend eternity begging for someone to piece him back together. He breathed, shakily, then looked at the angel once more and said, "God will not absolve you. God will not forgive you." 'If He forgives, I would not be here, would I?'

And then they barreled into the forest. Azazel swerved, trying to dip below the canopy of leaves only to find himself drenched in darkness as spindly branches extended their fingers, grazing him, scratching at his robes but not quite catching yet. Denser, denser, the woods closing in, close to snapping its jaw shut with the two angels inside. Azazel watched the Earth rush to him as he was forced to pull his wings closer, and soon, there was no choice but to run again. He allowed himself to land in a sprint, tugging inside all his feathers, and continued moving.

Azazel was sure he heard the wings behind him, the angel in chase, but with his breaths and his heart drumming both so loud, it was almost impossible to know. All he could imagine to do was keep

moving, thinking, ‘God, God, God,’ and ‘What have I done?’ and ‘Surely, I did something, before I was born. How could you make me if you knew I’d end up here, about to be tortured by your angels? Aren’t I your angel, too, Father? What have I done?’ Why were his eyes itching, and why were the lower crevices dribbling wet, threatening to drizzle tears? ‘Why did you never forgive me?’

A tree was suddenly too close, and Azazel skewed aside too late, slamming his arm against the bark, clawing at his skin. Crying out, he rebounded harshly, his foot caught on an ankle; he stumbled, then finally crashed onto the grass. Twigs shouted out beneath him, jabbing into his side alongside the rocks the angel had fallen onto, but in the wake of his yell — there was silence. Or, rather, there was as much silence as the Earth could ever find, which meant there wasn’t much silence at all. Wind whistled between the trees above, and there was the tiny skittering of insects around his head, and coos of animals, their howls and their yaps, and in the distance — the screams still. But with his heart slowing, Azazel felt a little serenity, something like the silence he desperately craved in this second. He clenched his eyes shut, holding his breath to try and stop the couple of pants streaming out from his mouth, and he waited.

Azazel hesitated, but he did lift his head once he was certain there was no sound of running toward him. He wobbled as he sat up, groaning and placing a hand on a hip, just to feel the cloth of his tunic and feel the hardness of a bone underneath. It was grounding, enough for him to flutter his eyes back open. Darkness, more than before — the stars streaming only in trickles between the conglomerate of trees’ heads and limbs. He craned his neck, searching for if the angel had really left him. No sign, no hint; nothing met his looking.

Sighing, Azazel cursed himself. Perhaps running to the forest had been the wrong idea, or maybe he had distracted the angel long enough that many of the humans had found somewhere to hide. ‘I hope Eitan and Naamah are safe.’ He hoped Eitan’s grandmother was also safe. He swallowed painfully, searching for the resolve to return to whatever war the angels had brought down to the Earth.

Creak.

Azazel twisted over his head, raised it, and he saw that there was

some kind of creature, staring down from a branch. In the dark, he could hardly make out more than its shape — long but with one leg bent beneath, its foot perched over the bark, while the other leg dangled. It must've had hair, falling in obsidian-black straightness down from its head; and the eyes — they were an onyx, one reflecting the moon so perfectly that Azazel could have believed he was seeing into the night sky itself.

The angel was so mesmerized, and confused, that all he could do was call out, "What— What are you?!" With another creak, the creature shifted, one hand bracing itself on the body of the tree. "Are you an animal?" It was wrong — the gaze of this creature felt uniquely wrong, and Azazel was soon taking steps back, worried, his heart fluttering. He knew already; he knew what it was. "You're a demon, aren't you? Get away—!"

The demon lunged at him, moving so quick Azazel had no time to react. He merely hit the ground once more and shouted, throwing out a hand as he became instantly trapped beneath the weight of a towering, though thin, beast. He kicked out a leg, then forcefully got his foot between the demon's abdomen and his own, and he struck, hard, then did it again.

The demon hissed, inching backward, just enough for Azazel, thrashing, to try and escape, but it was to no avail. A proper claw slashed him so hard Azazel's head jerked to the side, and he felt his skin slice open, smooth, in a sudden scald. His breath left him once more; but only growing more frantic, Azazel kicked and tried to hit the demon back, anywhere he could, even beating him over the head with his elbow hard enough to once again force the beast back. Yet the demon refused to surrender — seizing Azazel's neck and sinking in almost all his talons at once, so deep the tips met at the center of his throat.

Eyes rolling back, mouth filling with blood, Azazel would have screamed if he could. Instead, all he could do was convulse, jerk rapid and unwilling in a shudder of agony. He could see nothing, quite suddenly, just feel the sharp pain of muscle tearing and snapping like the strings of a viola. And he cried — it came out of him so harsh that he believed blood was clawing itself out from his eyes too. He wanted

to beg, say he was sorry the way he had told God he was sorry. Spots of black, speckling on the already-dark world, appeared in his sight, his arms were going limp even while his feet continued to kick against the ground uselessly.

As Azazel fell into the empty between life and death, he heard a nearby voice call, "Asmodeus! Don't hurt him!"

CHAPTER 17



His name was Mammon — the angel who stole his virginity and never returned it. Azazel had known him decently enough, but when he appeared to him beneath the simultaneous glow and darkness of war, his tunic oddly ripped, torn up too high — he hadn't recognized him. He had instead reached for Rosier, who was leaning against the wall, holding a decapitated head in his ruby-red hands. And, at the side of Mammon, there was another angel who would become a demon — both of them reaching for Azazel and Rosier quite suddenly, grabbing them, saying that they would be coming with them somewhere safer, quieter.

But from this memory, Azazel stirred from.

Nearby, there was a sound — *clink, clink* — then a few words, small and sighing. Then, little notes of humming from lips that must've been pursed, and soon, Azazel felt his heavy eyelids lift. 'Where am I?' The void of his mind responded; there was a hole where his memory should be; he felt like a hole, gaping and open and utterly empty. 'Who am I?' He was Azazel, angel of God, an angel who painted his body, one crowned the angel of body paint once. Crowned by who? He reeled in a deep breath, slow, and vaguely sensed his shoulders tremor. There was smooth cloth wrapped around his throat, firm but not tight.

He stared at limestone — carved smooth but still carrying some rough edges typical of the inside of a cave. It was a cave, after all, or something like it — Azazel felt this as he dragged his sight down from the ceiling to where a crimson tapestry with golden tassels at the end, teasing the ground, was hanging from thin ropes. It was patterned, in darker red and pine browns. It was altogether different from the carpets, however, which were dyed in dark greens and browns, clashing fairly brutally with the walls. At their feet, several more mats laid, along with cushions.

But there was also a divan, with a few pillows colorfully embroidered, though less masterfully than the other objects Azazel saw here. A table some steps away was low to the ground and made of dark wood, ornately carved at the limbs. Not far — this room was quite cramped — a fireplace was settled with flames crackling. Above it, there was a gridiron that upheld a bronze kettle, not singing quite yet. And then, nearly lost within all this, on his knees at the hearth, was a creature, humming as he readied silver teacups on a golden platter — a demon, small in stature but built softly. Fruit-like.

Tail whipping incessantly behind him, the demon reached for the woodsy brown sticks of cinnamon from a painted ceramic jar, then worked to arrange two each in the cups. He was short-haired, up to just his shoulders, though there were pale flowers there, too — with their ivy-green stems braided into his black threads. His horns were curved, not unlike a ram, by his temples, and they were partly adorned by golden links and clasps. There was jewelry elsewhere on him — gems on his earlobes, flaxen chains on his throat, his wrists, and his ankles. As for clothing, he wore modest wine-colored layers hanging from his waist to his lower legs, with a dark top of thicker cotton.

Azazel shifted, the bed beneath him creaking. He breathed, feeling how warm the comforter was, then placing a hand on the feather-stuffed bedding proper, pushing himself up, tepid and unsure. At this, the demon turned to face him — his eyes were muddy golden — and a smile erupted over his sweet lips before he clambered to his feet, hurrying over.

Instantly, the angel whispered: “Rosier—?”

Rosier met him with a tight embrace, laughing, then inching back-

ward and planting his mouth on Azazel's cheek, then his forehead, then his nose, then his other cheek. It wasn't long before laughter was spilling out of them both, and in disbelief, Azazel wrapped his arms around his old friend as well, nearly pulling him onto the mattress with him. But the demon held strong, raising only one knee onto the bed, then leaning back to take the angel gently by the jaw. "Azazel, my beloved friend, I thought I'd never see you again."

"Rosier," Azazel replied, breathless and smiling, hurting from how wide it was. "Brother." He raised a hand, brushing his fingers over Rosier's knuckles, as he looked upon the face of a demon — with the base still of an angel, but with sadder eyes, irises darker than Azazel remembered, maybe canines filed a little sharper. He lifted his gaze to the horns next, thinking that, despite the adornments, they were still horns and this dear friend was still a demon. "I'm," he began, "glad to see you're alright." Because he was — he could have looked worse; he had seen demons that looked much worse.

Rosier's lips twitched, nearly fell into a frown. "I'm alright. And I'm happy you're alright too." He leaned and pressed yet another kiss to Azazel's forehead, murmuring against his skin, "They don't like that I worry for the angels, but I do. I worried for you." He removed his fingers from Azazel's jaw, brought them to trace one of the tiny curls by his temple. "Does anything hurt? I wet the bandages on your neck, and I'm happy to see you were healed even if I couldn't administer the healing myself."

Azazel blinked, and he remembered the events that'd led him here with a new weight on his throat. He inched backward, leaving Rosier's touch, then reached for the soft cloth bandaged around his neck. "Oh. I— Something attacked me." He'd been sure it was a demon. "Did you save me?"

Laughing a little — but Rosier did it weak, nervous. "Save is too strong of a word for what I did." He shifted so that he could return to his feet, then he brushed at his clothes. "But I'm happy you can still speak. I was expecting the worst."

A long creaking called their attention, and Azazel turned his head to see a wooden door, rounded at the head and stuck between cave walls, opening wide. What was revealed was a creature, curled forward

as it leaned its weight on two canes made of gold — both engraved with small, intricate figures of beasts opening their jaws, pouncing, baring their claws. The stranger used both aids as he walked, moving inside, then lifting one of the canes to slam the door shut behind him. Grunting, the creature limped and staggered along, approaching one of the divans and flopping onto it just as Rosier hurried over.

“Asmodeus!” he said. “I told you not to walk too far.”

It was Asmodeus’ head — that was certainly true — though the horns that jutted out from the top were long, dark, and pointed sharp. Everything else was conglomeration — different textured skins malformed and stitched together to form a demonic torso, scarred, most particularly at the top. One of his feet was like that of a rooster, whereas his hands were grotesquely stitched together with jagged claws. This beast — with his long, dark hair cascading straight over his shoulders — wore jewelry to contrast his monstrosity — gems, chains, on his neck, his limbs, his chest, waist, dangling from his ears, and even draped over his face. Yawning, the demon Asmodeus said, “I was trying to avoid Gemory. He’s been trying to sit on my cock all morning.”

At this, Azazel glanced at Asmodeus’ body again, only to note that he wore nothing more than a silk robe. It was crimson, but old, tattered, and indecently open at the front, barely clung to his shoulders as the bottom end splayed by his hips onto the divan — exposing the intimacies between his legs quite casually. The angel instantly turned his entire body away, his eyes widened, heart stopped, feeling his shoulders raise and stiffen. He swallowed, thick and uneasy, and listened to the two speak again.

Rosier sighed. “You should tell him you’re not interested.”

Grumbling — “And have to deal with his seducing? I’d rather walk the extra hour.”

“Well, move over there and sit. I’m making some tea— Oh, and fix your clothes! If you’re walking around like that, I can see why Gemory might get the wrong idea!”

“My clothes were right a minute ago.” Creaking, from the divan, then a grunt as Asmodeus, presumably, stood up. “Where’s the tea, then? What type?”

“It’s not done. And it’s chamomile. Now go sit!”

The clangs of the golden walking sticks moving along the ground — *clack, clack*. “Oh, chamomile? You know that’s my favorite, darling Rosier.” He swirled the syllables on his tongue, a little snicker in between.

“Yes, yes,” flustered, “whatever you say, just sit. If you stand too long you’ll hurt yourself.”

“But may I have a kiss first?”

“I’ll push you into the fire if you don’t sit.”

“If you want a good roast, then you should make sure to turn me after a few minutes. They say a good four minutes will do.”

“Who says that?”

“Me. I just said it.” There was some chuckling, then Azazel heard the thump of Asmodeus sitting down again. “Alright, don’t make that face. Look at me. I did as you said, dear.” At this, the angel turned his head — saw Rosier leaning to kiss Asmodeus on the mouth, brief but soft. “Mm,” answered the beastier one, almost purring against Rosier’s lips. “Thank you.” He grinned, sleazy, as Rosier drew away.

Azazel couldn’t stand silence any longer, straightening up and calling out, “Where am I? Rosier, what is this place? And why are you —?” Kissing, kissing a demon. “I shouldn’t be here.” He began kicking the quilt from his legs, hurrying to twist his body and plant his bare feet on carpet. It’d been months now since he felt the coarseness of material such as this beneath his soles, but even still, it felt different than the fineness of Heaven. It felt makeshift, rougher. Standing up, though wavering in place, he locked eyes with the two, with Rosier’s curved, worried brows and Asmodeus’ face, falling into narrowed eyes and tight-pressed lips.

Rosier moved to Azazel, scampering until he reached him, taking his hand. He said, “Azazel, have some tea too.”

“He should leave,” said Asmodeus, and behind him, on the gridlock, the kettle began to scream.

Slowly, Rosier looked between the demon he’d kissed and the angel, but he soon tugged Azazel’s hand and said, “Come. Please. The water is boiling already.” Azazel knew he was trapped then — trapped by the social commitment to pleasantries and manners. There was something very ancient about it; it carried the memory of Heaven

when it was no more than angels and their perfect society of kindness, the time before the war and wickedness. Carefully, Azazel settled his gaze on Asmodeus' glower as he approached. 'Last time I saw you, the only part of you left was your head. I saw it. You were in the arms of Rosier. I asked why you were in his arms. He said you hurt him. I thought you were a beast.'

Rosier settled him down on the same carpet as Asmodeus but on the other side of the wooden table. Then, he moved to the fire and steaming water. A folded cloth hung at the sill above the fireplace, and Rosier took it before using it to grip the kettle at its handle. Simply, he turned, then moved down onto his knees to begin pouring the water onto cups carrying cinnamon sticks and chamomile buds in metal strainers. Azazel stared at his drink, watching the gray steam drift upward from yellowing water, as Rosier took the tray and moved to sit beside Asmodeus. Beside each other, he could see that they were both monsters, despite whatever memories Azazel had, both damned creatures that had remade themselves on Earth into things barely recognizable as angels.

"Tell me," Azazel said, deciding no other words would be suitable, "everything."

Immediately, Asmodeus snapped, "Satan won't be happy you're here."

Rosier sighed, setting the platter on the table, then taking one of the cups of tea he'd just prepared, only to shove it into Asmodeus' hands. "I think Asmodeus means to say that he's sorry. He's the one who attacked you." Rosier tilted his head at his friend with a strict look, but Asmodeus' cold gaze had fallen to the drink in his hands. "If I weren't there to stop him, you might've ended up in pieces." Pulling a nervous smile onto his lips, Rosier faced Azazel once more. "But we're lucky, and it seems the water did enough to heal you on its own, though you should still take some time to rest."

Gingerly, Azazel's fingers reached for some tea, feeling the warmth through the porcelain, and he remembered that he'd made chamomile too, not long before coming to Earth. He was remembering a lot of things. "Can you tell me where I am?" 'Rosier, you were blood-stained, your hair cut short, and there was nothing in your eyes except reflec-

tion. Like I was staring into water in darkness, catching glimpses of my fear in yours. The sky was gutting open, bleeding cosmos onto us.’

“It’s our home,” said Rosier. “We demons have lived inside and beneath this mountain for a long time, though we also have homes in caves all around the Earth, and we live in the tunnels between them too. We’re everywhere, but Satan — Satan is here.” Rosier glanced at Azazel’s drink, only momentarily, but it spurred Azazel to quickly lift it to his mouth, the heat burning his lips, his tongue — the scalding like the fires he had narrowly escaped. “We’ve been here millions of years, almost since the fall itself. So, the real curiosity is you, Azazel.” His voice softened, grew even quieter. “All of you angels. Why are you on Earth?”

Breathing, tapping his nails idly on his teacup, Azazel rearranged his legs on the carpet, explaining, “It was Samyaza, my housemate. Do you remember him? He argued with God on how us angels should come and bring the humans back to Him.” But his mind was caught up in the past now, thinking, ‘When one angel dragged you away from me because you said you wanted to talk to Lucifer — I shouted after you in the hold of angel Mammon. I kicked my feet, struggling in his arms, watching that other angel lead you away with a head in your arms. I begged them not to hurt you. My voice breaking up on the sobs. I reached out for you, but you didn’t look back. Do you remember, Rosier?’

“Baal said something like that,” Rosier replied. “But why? Why do you angels care for the plight of humans?” His voice was delicate, curious rather than accusatory.

‘I,’ Azazel mused, ‘never saw you again. Mammon started dragging me, and he told me to quiet my screaming, and soon enough, we were approaching my house. And I told him to please let me go, that I would do anything. If he wanted, I would let him into my home and give him anything he wished. I didn’t want to be hurt. I cried that I was on their side. Ask me to turn back on God, and I would in an instant. How could I know better?’ “I don’t know.”

Rosier flickered his gaze to Asmodeus, whose face remained contorted in frustration. “I see.” He shifted where he was, then added, “Asmodeus and I were in the forest collecting fruits, or at least I was.

Asmodeus followed without my permission.” The other demon laughed, lowly. “But the forest can be dangerous at night with all the animals being so large. You were running from something.”

“Not an animal.” Azazel found himself, abruptly, snorting. “Angels.”

“Angels?”

“Michael and his angels.”

At this, Rosier drew a breath and Asmodeus finally dropped the overt irritation, turning perplexed, bewildered with a scoff, echoing, “Michael?”

“We came with God’s blessing,” Azazel said. “Half the archangels wished us well the day we left. When the attack happened today, we thought it was demons, but then we approached, and we saw Michael, and— and he was horrifying. He was covered in blood, and he said nothing, and—” He’d begun speaking quickly, and Azazel shook his head to try and settle the heart that’d nearly fallen from his chest. “He killed people. So many. Maybe all of them.” He clutched his cup tighter, seeing the surface of the tea tremor. Eitan. Naamah. Were they gone now? Crushed beneath a ball of fire, made dust beneath the hands of angels. “He was a monster.”

Rosier spoke again, shakier. “You don’t have any idea why he’d do this?”

‘I do,’ Azazel didn’t say. ‘But I can’t play innocent this time. When Mammon pulled me into one of the rooms during the war, I screamed, thinking he wanted to hurt me, but then he took my face in his hands. He said, Azazel, I’m not going to harm you; I would never do that. I finally recognized him. Mammon, my friend. And he told me, I love you, I’ve loved you since I heard your laugh for the first time. I went to bed every night angry that I was too shy to touch you. I grew jealous of the paint on your lips. All I could do was look at him, my eyes wide, my cheeks warm at his touch. I’ve always been weak to liking. I’ll befriend anyone. I could love anyone. When he kissed me, I loved him instantly.’

Rosier must’ve noticed that Azazel was in deep thought, as he swallowed in the silence he received as response, then muttered, “There’s no point in hiding you. If this is true, if Michael is really here, then Satan needs to know.”

Asmodeus twisted around. “Rosier—”

“Trust me,” was the swift, poised reply. “I’ll go with him. And what other choice is there? Other demons caught us dragging Azazel here. Lucifer likely already knows, and he’s waiting for us to tell him.” Pursing his lips, he added, “I’m sure that’s the case.” He planted his hands on the ground, then climbed back to his feet, moved over to Azazel, settling a hand over his shoulder. “Come. We shouldn’t risk waiting and infuriating Satan any more than we have to.” Asmodeus argued, saying that it would be better to wait, to ensure that what Azazel said was true, that it was really Michael.

But Azazel also set his tea down, then stood, trembling, and nodded his head. He said he wanted to speak to the devil. And he tried to breathe, taking a step back from the table, hearing Asmodeus curse angrily, but then moving to stand as well, struggling on the two golden canes. Rosier rushed to him, told him to stay, but Asmodeus said he wouldn’t, to not even try to convince him. Watching them, Azazel felt his head too light, feeling further away than he was, like he were drifting somewhere that wasn’t here. Rosier’s hand found his, but it didn’t ground him, just tugged him, pulled him toward the door. Then, past it.

“Duke!” shouted a voice — a beast with only one horn stumbling along the corridor, and he was staring at Asmodeus. “Satan told me to call for you and your demon and—” The corridor was cold and wide, trailed by obsidian black, cast iron poles; at their peaks, they held torches. This was on the left side, for on the right, there were murals, painted between mosaic borders. On them, reds and oranges and yellows converged to paintings of beastly creatures — some in action, some wrestling, some in static, aggressive positions directed at the viewer. The floor was carpet, not too dissimilar to those in the room they’d just left, but these were stepped on by far more demons and thus dirtied brown. “Is that—?” The beast stared at Azazel with wide eyes, and there were a dozen others scattered around, many chattering, turning their head to stare too.

The demons were attired as scandalous as Asmodeus or as intricate as Rosier, all drooping in styles like robes, tunics, gowns, or skirts, but colorfully put together and adorned with chains of jewelry — all deeply

reminiscent of old Heaven but still something quite different. At the sight of Azazel, some of the fallen staggered back, a few quickly turned on their heels and hurried away, tails swinging. But Asmodeus called out to the one-horned demon before he might've done the same: "He wants us in his court? Now?"

With a slight stammer — "Yes. He said immediately."

"We'll be having an audience then," Asmodeus muttered, then leaned on both his canes, taking steps forward, brushing against Azazel's side with a bitter shove. "Hurry."

Azazel licked his dry lips, swallowed through an even dryer throat, now seeing how the demons were running only to place their mouths by each other's ears, to gossip about an angel being among them. Following, he kept turning his head, looking past the archways leading into wider spaces, rooms, with feather-plump furniture, wool-woven carpets and tapestries, hookahs and opium lamps. Myrrh and spices and roasted meat waltzed a strong but hearty smell onto the corridor as they walked; when Rosier leaned to touch his arm and squeeze it reassuringly, Azazel noted the scent of ginger somewhere. Ahead of them, the hall was widening, approaching a great wall of stone wherein a golden doorway was punctured through and where towering sculptures of beasts, like those of the past and those of imagination, were engraved. Seven demons in steel armor were stationed, holding silver weapons but pointing the sharp ends, unthreateningly, downward. Without a word, four of these guards took pieces of the entrance and began prying the doors apart with a loud screech.

'We tumbled onto the bed,' Azazel remembered, 'and I asked him what he was doing undressing me. He said Lucifer taught him. I was never shy of my body, so when he revealed it, I was confused as to why there were flutters of anxiety in my heart, crawling down to my belly. He asked if I trusted him. I could hear the screams outside.'

Together, the two demons and angel stepped inside.

'I asked him to kiss me again. He did, harsher, making a noise against me that stirred a moan up from my heart into his lips. His mouth climbed down to my chest as his hand trailed to palm where I'd begun to ache.'

'I rolled against him, my eyes burning despite the tears that gath-

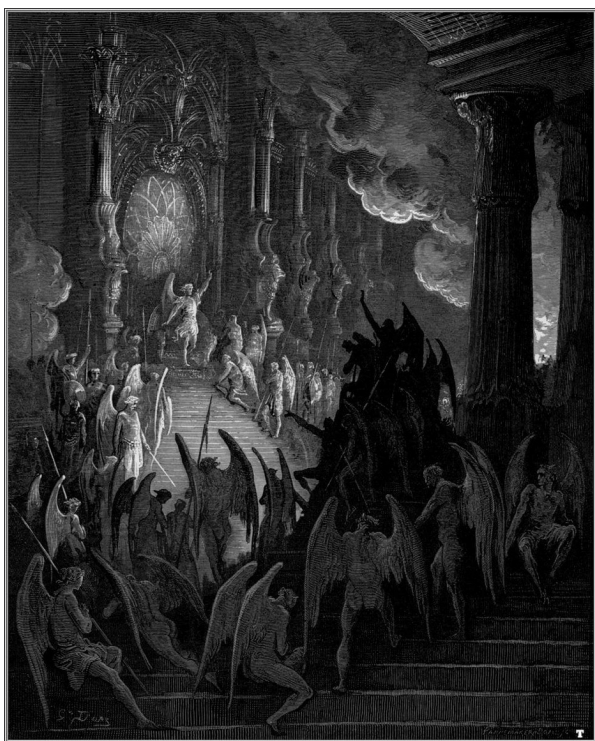
ered there. When his fingers moved to where I was open, I yelled, but he reassured me. I asked him to kiss me again, again, and he did, flicking his tongue far below where I'd wanted it. But I cried out, still, my fingers in his hair. Whining, wanting. He said he adored me, and when he put himself against me, I let him in, hissing first, then loosening beneath his fiddling hands. I could hear the screams of angels outside. He fucked me, and I was listening to the screams.'

They walked toward the throne.

'Samyaza had been looking for me. I heard his shout, then I was suddenly empty, like one of my own organs had been yanked from the hold of my tendons. When I lifted my head, I saw Mammon beneath Samyaza's pummeling fists, coming back bloodier each time, and Samyaza was yelling, his face reddened with a rage I'd never seen until he looked back at me. Then, he grabbed me, shouting with pink creeping over the white of his eyes. I wanted to ask what was wrong. Why are you crying? I felt good. I think I'm dripping blood, but I liked it. Samyaza forced on my clothes, instead, wouldn't let me near the war that would fling Mammon, my lover, down into damning. When the wake of judgment came, Samyaza forced me onto my knees before the Lord's Throne. To beg, to make my case in God's court. Repent — Samyaza pleaded to me, holding me before Him. Crying, I asked why. They called me dirty — all the angels there. And here I am, again, to plead for my life.'

The beautiful devil smiled.

PART II
HELL



CHAPTER 18



‘I don’t remember,’ Rosier thought, ‘the fall. But I remember the end of it — my wings broken beneath me, bones so crushed they were like hints of pale rock dispersed over sunny feathers and blood. If I had fallen from Heaven, I couldn’t tell; over my head, there was gray smoke freckled by flaming specs. Destruction had made me, I felt; the scorch of the Earth had birthed me. And I knew you felt the same. All of you — sown upon the same Earth as me, your wails so loud they must’ve reached whatever place we’d all plunged down from. You were calling out for help, for death — God’s conditional love never responding. Perhaps, I should have been screaming too, like I’d fallen not from the sky but from a womb. But there was a friend cradled in my arms, though he was only his face, his hair, some of his neck.’

‘Asmodeus. Who did this to you? I lifted my body, only to cry out like a tendon had been attaching me to the Earth and was snapping. I held you closer. Asmodeus. My head is cracked at the sides, and whatever composes me is oozing out — trickling over eyes I refuse to close, the white in them tinting to the color of my own heart. Our flesh has turned a cage — I tried to tell you — with nothing within. I could only hold you tighter, and I tried to crawl with a spine clutching my wings as tight as it could, refusing to leave the matted feathers behind even if

they would never flap again. I held you; I'm holding you. I would not let go either. When grief crept around me, it was in the shape of other fallen beasts, angel and animal, slumping or shaking with the seize, the dance, of death. They were crying out for God again, but an echo sounded from the sky. We were damned, I knew. For the final time, I reached out for Him, but He did not lift me, did not hold me. We were disowned, and our Father would never answer us again.'

'But I held you, as I began to walk. My memories — I left them behind like my wings, left them to return to me when they could. Death was holding my hand when God would not. I traversed scalding ground, searching for familiar faces, finding instead doubled-over creatures — beasts and angels, but I struggled now to tell their charred meat apart. And I saw, then, death. I learned I had been an infant all of my life. Where do the dead go? God did not answer me, and death met me with another echo. It was me and my voice, my screaming — alone in the wake of fall. And it was you, Asmodeus, still in my arms until my shaking hand found the shred of my garments and tore off a strip. I wrapped your face, made a sling, attached you to me, and I felt my body as I did. At this, I stopped, because I didn't know it anymore — my shape, my flesh. It was bleeding. I could see red spots on my feet.'

"Who are you?" I asked my body, and an echo returned, "Who are you?" I didn't know the answer. I didn't, couldn't. I turned my head to yours and said, "My body is different now. So is yours." And, I thought: I am no longer a child, and I never will be again.'

'For a hundred years, we looked for Lucifer, hungrier each day, thirstier, angrier. Earth had fallen from its tree in paradise and now lay rotting beneath our feet. But it was speckled with craters, and we gathered to peer into the largest. We didn't recognize him — the king of the damned. They said you were just a poor, disfigured beast. They said you were nothing more than a victim of God's wrath, an animal at the wrong place, the wrong time. That you were not Lucifer. But I broke from them, weakly climbed down into the wound in the Earth, and approached you. Another fallen angel was with me. He was Baal, though I didn't realize it yet.'

'I remember, Lucifer, the first time you came into my house,

awkward on legs. Your voice unsure. Bottom lip quivering. Your beauty — like a gash that you wanted sewn shut. I learned your birth had been unspectacular, which must've doomed you to a spectacular life. And now here you are, the infant whose hair I had brushed, whose cheeks I had kissed until they warmed against my mouth — quiet and still. A God-made beast, gutting your sin out in a gore I could delude myself to find beautiful still. My wailing was as wet and hot as your blood on me.'

'The demons healed you. They'd nearly forgotten how, but they remembered just enough to recreate the beauty I knew you'd despised so earnestly once. Then, they raised your body from the ground and shielded you from the rains of fire with their own bodies, and they set you in the shadow of a mountain on one of the final beds of green. With the last of their jewelry, they adorned you, and they kissed your hands. I stayed at your side, waiting for you to speak, except you did not. Your eyes were open, but the life in them was absent. And so the demons cried: "Lucifer is dead! God has killed him! Our star has burnt out, and we've been damned to darkness forever!" I thought this too. I stared out and felt the smoke would never clear, the fires would never simmer. We were in the shadow of a wrathful Lord.'

'And then the fallen angels warred, like they had done in Heaven. Leaderless, they fractured into groups, all searching among the wasteland for any familiar, living green, only for despair and desperation to guide their hands onto the carcasses of the beasts. With that monster skin, they mended their own; with monster bones, they replaced their own. The taste of meat, they learned, was hearty and rich. From beside you, I witnessed this. The both of you — Lucifer, lying dead, adorned in all the gems that survived the fall, and Asmodeus, a mere head wheezing and gurgling on blood, never speaking. I dragged your bodies to a cleft in the mountainside, and I hid us within as the demons' bargaining with each other turned fierce coercion, turned that war again. Soon, I believed I was dead too.'

'The few ferns left upright cried droplets, and I only ever left the mountain's fissure to collect them in my palms, then returned hastily so that I wouldn't be discovered and hurt. I fed you, the both of you —

leaves and the sweat of the Earth — I did it every dawn. I met the dawn, without realizing it came. I felt nothing at it. I cried often but felt nothing, only gathered the tears trickling from my expressionless eyes to have you both drink.’

‘Occasionally, I saw the demons — Baal often among them, having found a taste for war. “In Lucifer’s memory!” he proclaimed. Whenever he approached, I didn’t let him too close to you, Lucifer. He said he wanted to kiss you. I didn’t trust him. I didn’t trust anyone. I saw a group of demons demand food from one, then put him in stone chains afterward. From behind a mound, I saw a demon grind back into his fingers, plunged into his body, gasping and crying out in pleasure. I had seen death and now I saw fucking — alone or crowded, wanted or not.’

‘I kissed your hair, Asmodeus, my heart warmed for you. I whispered that I missed the sound of your voice. One day, you were choking on your blood, and whining miserably, your tears pink and thick — and I pulled you to me. I kissed you on the mouth for the first time — gentle to try and soothe your pain, but I found my lips dripping of you — ruby red with the tang of silver. My hands were on your jaw, holding your head close to my own, and you continued to bleed, onto my fingers and onto the rest of my ruined body. I kissed you again, then again. I said I was sorry, and I cried now — for the both of us.’

‘I kissed you, too, Lucifer. Bundled up, I slept between you and Asmodeus. Everything hurt. I never stopped bleeding. I shut my eyes and thought of my old house. The painted tile. Again, I cried, feeling nothing.’

‘But, one day, I roused from dreams with nothing beside me. Asmodeus was in my arms as usual, but not you, Lucifer. Shouting out your name, I hurried to stand, shoving my friend’s head in my sling, my heart faster than me, running ahead of me. Outside, I met the destruction that had persisted for centuries — it had been centuries, though I hadn’t realized it, had spent so much of that time in senseless, empty routine — but I was suddenly awake, looking everywhere, believing the fallen angels had stolen you in sleep, had sought to desecrate your body, had perhaps fallen out of love with the first demon, the one who led us here.’

‘Indeed, I found you among them. The fallen angels were gathered,

still braced with weapons, some on the ground and injured. You stood, the sun tucked by your head — gorgeous in all the adornments the fallen angels had gifted during the first funeral they dedicated to you. You told them: “Stop the wars. Fallen angels, you act like you’ve never learned to build a house or tend a garden. Did all of your heads strike the rocks when you landed? Have you forgotten who you are, how we got here, and who watches overhead, laughing at you? Drop your weapons in the moment it takes for you to remember.” Someone said your name. You interrupted: “I said I would be your king, that we would create a paradise greater than the one we left behind. And look at the state of you all. Look at the Earth you have allowed to fester. God must think that He was right to keep us angels captive.”

‘Wondrously, a fallen angel called out, “We thought you were dead, Lucifer!” You said that you did die but only to resurrect. You had conquered death, then returned from the destruction anew. You were no longer a reckless angel, you were His adversary, and we were not angels anymore, but demons. We called you Satan.’

Rosier breathed, then stared into the devil’s throne room that held every scar of that past. Bones — larger than any animals roaming the present Earth — littered the edges of the theater. It was, indeed, a theater: plush, crimson seats cascading down in a half-circle, the ones nearest the throne the most extravagant and lined with gold. There was, then, a flat space between the audience and throne — not particularly large and with a floor of smoothed stone. Here, a leopard was stretching with a great yawn that showed the sharp of its teeth, a tail flicking behind, before it circled and hopped onto the platform that the throne was perched upon. The forward base of the stage was abundantly engraved — glyphs in between paintings, in between sculptures of beast heads jutting out. And the overbearing, earthly smell of the room drifted from flora, overgrown over the seats, over the walls, the ceilings. Above, there were small, thin apertures, beaming sunlight onto the seat of the demon king. There were three leopards here, the roaming one heading for the two sitting at the feet of their keeper.

Satan. What is there to say of the devil? He was standing before his tall, elaborate seat, carrying a gaze of stars and lips plump with sweetness. On his body — a loose red garment, thin and almost sheer, hung

sleeves and crossed over his body to hide just one side of his chest. A golden belt, with every gem of every color embedded, was locked snug at his waist; all the other jewelry on him, hanging from everywhere it could, was similar: excessive. His hair was as sunny as it had always been, his skin warmly brown — his beauty so bright he was a morning star, God's most favorite creation. His pride and His joy, His beauty; His angel, with a crown on his pretty head, made of thorn and twig, with four bony horns protruding from it.

The king of the demons, the devil, outstretched both hands at his sides, like an artist eager to display his work. Wispy, his hair draped down his body in a loving caress and housed minuscule braids scattered among it — threaded with small ribbons, with some hints of feathers. "Welcome," called Satan, all of the Earth's pride in his smile. "To what do I owe a visit from an angel?"

Standing at either side of the throne, among the tigers, were four demons total — monstrous as those on the night of Baal's attack on Enoch's village. They stood several steps away from Satan, save for one with gargantuan horns and the tail of a bull, drifting out from beneath his thigh-length simple tunic. Though he was made beastly, Azazel instantly recognized him as Baal, knew those large, browned eyes, those curls. As his upper lip curled into a chuckling smirk, jagged teeth shined.

Azazel stepped past the golden-trimmed seats, moving into the arena to lift his chin and meet Satan in all his glory. 'You're as beautiful as you were then,' he thought, feeling Rosier follow him and hearing Asmodeus' canes, though hesitatingly, walk onto the flat stone as well. He breathed, out through his nose, then in through his lips. 'It's like the devil is still an angel, despite what we said of you in Heaven — an angel lost among the demons that adore you. Demons you created. How God is my mother, you've become theirs.'

Rosier was the one who spoke first: "You knew we brought Azazel here?"

"Sit, Rosier. And, Asmodeus, you sit as well." Satan did the same as he'd ordered, slowly sinking onto his throne, then extending a long leg and crossing it over the other, tilting his head with a tinge of amusement in his smiling, squinting eyes. "I'm here to listen to the angel

you've been harboring. Azazel." The angel swallowed the nerves tied to his tongue. "It's still Azazel, isn't it?"

There was a second, or perhaps two, of silence before Azazel heard the two demons who'd brought him to this infernal place shuffling back, Rosier apologizing so quiet that Azazel hardly heard it. "Yes." He didn't know what to do except speak. "That's my name still."

One end of Satan's lips twirled upward, but he didn't reply instantly, lifting a hand and flicking his wrist; the gesture turned Azazel's head, and he saw more than a dozen demons with their heads crowded at the door, peering in. Azazel, too, noticed that there were two other pairs of doors, and these were abundant with beasts as well. They all must've followed him, keen to know why a long lost ex-brother was now among them — had he fallen, had Azazel run away from the Lord belatedly? 'Perhaps, I have,' he confessed. At Satan's indication, then, the demons spilled inside, forming not a line but a sea tide onto the seats of stomping feet and shoving and shouts, forming an audience next — heavy with the scent of peppercorn, cloves, wood, and biting brimstone. Their chatter was so loud it shook the walls, and some spat at Azazel, who watched them all over a shoulder, feeling a grimace threaten his lips.

"Now, now," Satan soothed, "don't be so loud, I can't hear the guest." At his word, the demons silenced; it must've been hundreds of them now, perhaps a little under a thousand. "Azazel, I have another question for you." Azazel turned back, face still contorted in worry. "Are you still an angel?"

"Yes," he said, maybe too quietly. "Yes, I am."

"Well, we don't like angels here," replied Satan. "So why have you dared visit?"

Azazel heard Rosier make a noise, but he replied quick so that his old friend wouldn't suffer the attention of the devil, "I'm not here because I want to be."

"My mistake," Satan replied, cheekily, "who kidnapped you, then?"

"I wasn't kidnapped," Azazel answered with more of a bite. "I was chased!"

"Oh, but what could scare a mighty angel of God like you, so much that it'd send him running?" Satan teased, and his audience

laughed with him — the demons, smiling broad at the angel, some licking their lips, whispering to one another. “Was it one of mine? There are so many demons that I often lose control of them, but if you describe her, then I could torture the culprit for you.” He waved a hand, whereas Azazel almost raised an eyebrow at the use of *her* — ‘surely, there are no women here.’ It must’ve been a joke.

Hesitant, Azazel swallowed, remembering for himself the series of events that brought him here as laughter continued to jab at his back. He stared at the throne that the devil sat upon — an extravagant chair of cushion and jade and gold interlinked, with a back accented by the skulls of beasts long gone — the great beasts, and then the great mammals that had followed them. They were gathered by his head, a halo of death — and yet there was something quite dramatic about it all — flamboyant. ‘I know drama. I know flamboyant.’ Parting his lips, Azazel replied, “Don’t you know already? One would think the king of the demons would know.”

Satan met Azazel’s blooming confidence with a snicker, untangling his legs, then spreading them, leaning back into his seat. “What makes you think I don’t? I knew you arrived, after all. But I’m a lot like God, you see — all-knowing but very keen to hear confessions from a shameful, beautiful mouth.”

The angel held his ground: “Then, you really know who it was that attacked the village I left? It doesn’t bother you?”

The devil scoffed. “Why would the state of some human settlement bother me?”

From behind, Rosier whispered Azazel’s name, sharply, as if to plead with him to stop provoking the devil, but Azazel was tired of being laughed at and, at least among demons, he had forgotten shame. “I see. Excuse me. I should have known that you and the archangel Michael are still friendly.” At this — utter, sharp silence, so sudden it was like a strike across the mouths of a thousand demons, but Satan was, for lack of a better word, unimpressed. He quirked an eyebrow, made a hum that betrayed no emotion. Azazel continued, voice tighter: “Lucifer—” “That’s still your name, isn’t it?” “I haven’t come to attack you. I haven’t come because I want to berate you for all the horrible

things you've caused and that have turned my life into pain. Though I have every right to!"

Loud, from the devil's side, Baal called out: "You're a God-damned, fucking liar." He stepped forward. "Michael hasn't come to Earth since Adam died."

"Well, I saw him!" Azazel argued. "We all did! And he was a beast! He brought angels with him, and they killed men, women, children, all without an ounce of pity! I was chased through the forest by one of Michael's angels!"

Gruffly, Asmodeus said, "It's true." Some demons behind guffawed, but Azazel turned back to see Rosier touching his friend's arm encouragingly. "He was running from an angel when I found him. I didn't see Michael, but I know there was destruction in Enoch's tribe."

"I was there too," added Rosier instantly. "I was out collecting berries, and I smelled fire, and I heard shouting. I didn't see any angels, but I knew there had been an attack. And you know the humans don't know war, so if it wasn't us demons that attacked then... it must've been the angels."

Azazel dragged his gaze down to his feet, bare against the stone, and he listened to the tumbling of the giant cats at the feet of Satan, playing despite the debate before them. He explained, "Two hundred angels came here to Earth so that we could teach the humans of our Lord, but —" He didn't want to say more, but there was no shame among demons, no pressure for guilt as there had been in both the old and new Heaven. "I fear God has forsaken us now because—" His heart itself was hitching, catching. "I fear the man I love has been killed by God."

"The man you love?" Satan echoed, his voice not as teasing or cruel as his earlier words. "You love a man, little angel?"

Azazel felt his cheeks flush, but there was no denying the lack of judgment in Satan's voice. It coaxed him; it made him say, "I do. I even married him. I like him so much. I thought— I thought I even loved him enough that the Lord couldn't be angry. All of us Watcher angels thought the same. What is the harm in loving?"

But, then, there was a wicked grin, a tease, “How can you be so naive?” Satan laughed easily, shoulders shaking, gesturing, saying, “One of God’s beautiful hosts, committing the sin of love, pretending to be a man by marrying. I can see now why He has punished you.” Azazel, red-faced, tried to cut in, but Satan wouldn’t allow it. “A man with an angel? The only thing worse I can think of is a man with a woman.” A roar of laughter from the devilish host, in the crowd and beside their king. “You can’t fuck an animal, or be fucked by an animal, then cry for Father to forgive you.”

At this, Rosier tried to speak again, saying “Lucifer— ”

But the devil wouldn’t stop, his leopards now turning to face his victim: “You may as well have put the cock of a horse in your mouth.” Standing, so fast that the golden threads of his hair tossed, rattled. “And now your God has sent His precious archangel to my Earth,” snarling, and at this, Azazel startled, catching, so quick, a glimmer of the beautiful devil’s disguise slip, reveal just some of the grotesque underneath, the damning, “to make a fine example out of you and the other Watcher angels. Why shouldn’t I rip you to pieces for bringing the arm of God here?”

As the devil’s voice grew louder, louder, Azazel heard the audience also begin to spit out insults, calling him a coward and betrayer. The sound of Rosier rushing over followed, and the ram-horned demon took Azazel’s arm, tugging on himself uncharacteristically harshly. The angel, however, could not look away from Satan’s fury, his hands curling into fists, his face twitching. At any moment, the order of a skinning, a scorching, a disembowel would surely leave his mouth. “Come with me,” Rosier was pleading quietly. “We need to hurry. Or he will hurt you.” He could not protect him any longer.

“For millions of years,” Satan snarled, “Earth has been the paradise of demons.” Rapidly, his audience hollered and cheered. “Now tainted by these humans, one of which you’ve fucked. Do you think I will pity an idiot angel? You have neither God nor the devil with you, Azazel.”

Pulling Azazel to him and beginning to stumble through a budding stampede of demons, Rosier remembered how the resurrected Lucifer had nurtured the Earth, ushered in with a sweet hand nubile greenery and flowers and fruits to flourish from every corner. Tenderly, he’d ordered the demons to build homes in caves, in mountains. He

extended the title of duke to those who supported him most ardently — though Rosier had handed his duke title to Asmodeus. And when any demons wept, Lucifer pulled them close, kissed their heads. Soon, the wars had ended, and the sky began clearing, and life crept back into the world they saw, slow yet eager. ‘You created beauty, out of damnation.’ But now God had returned with His destruction, His prince, His rapture.

CHAPTER 19



A man helped Samyaza escape the rubble. He had kicked a flamed pillar of wood off the angel's wings. He had grinned at him, face darkened by ash, and Samyaza had breathed out in relief, but a golden chain had flung at them, and it coiled itself around the stranger's throat like a serpent. Samyaza had whispered something he couldn't remember, that he will never remember. Firmly, Michael had yanked, torn off the man's head, and splattered Samyaza in blood and specs of severed spine. But as the leader of the Watchers screamed — the horror so great he felt it come back into his mouth, gurgling there — the prince of Heaven hovered far above with a hanging, reddened chain — *clink, clink* — a decapitation's fruit rolling to rest in his shadow.

Michael's face remained hidden within his helmet, no hint of emotion anywhere else on his cold, armored body, as he began to draw away. With a swift turn, he reeled his chain back and whistled sharply; at this, the other attacking angels jerked their heads in his direction. Samyaza stared at the chief prince's back, at his two great earthly wings and the two extra pairs peeking out in threat — one by his head and another sweeping by his feet. In a sudden surge, Michael flew upward, so fast his shape appeared to smear, but his angels followed with him.

Their retreat was so abrupt that the humans still screamed in terror

for several seconds, their hands still raised to shield themselves from an empty sky. Reluctantly, it began to wane — the yelling, the shrieks — though pained groaning would soon replace it, along with the rumbles of huts crumbling to the ground in a heap of flames and wood. Samyaza staggered to his feet proper as this occurred, still shaking, realizing there were some pieces of blood on him that were too thick and must've belonged to brains or some other soft organ. “No, no,” left Samyaza’s mouth, but his senseless words did nothing to comfort him.

Where were the angels? ‘Are they really gone?’ Why had they attacked? ‘Are they headed toward the other tribes to slaughter others?’ Why had God done this? ‘I know why He has done this.’ Samyaza breathed so profoundly that the smoke filled his lungs and left his throat raw. ‘It’s too hot,’ he mused, ‘to cry.’ Because he wanted to, or at least he thought that he did; the edges of his eyes were inflamed, all of him was, as he stared at the head of the dead man who’d tried to help him.

He had seen the inside of a skull, when he was younger, standing in one of the homes at the center of Heaven that, so recently, had been offered to Raphael for him to nurse in. Samyaza had been his junior by many hundred million years, looking over the shoulder of the sitting angel — who was not yet an archangel — on the bed. He was working with a skull, carefully placing each strand of hair back into place. The mind was a pink clutter, Samyaza had learned — not so different in its pulsing and softness than a heart, but lighter in its hue; and the mind was protected from the world by a mere thin bone.

“Why is something so precious,” Samyaza had asked, “guarded by something so delicate?”

“You can ask the same of flesh,” Raphael said, then smiled beside the grotesqueness of his handiwork. “Flesh and soul, I mean. But God constructed all that we see, and we angels should know better than to question the ground we build homes on. You, in particular, should heed my thoughts.” Samyaza was still young, trembling in his fingers, eyes heavy with drowsy, and Raphael had said ominous phrases such as these since they’d been introduced some months ago. Always, he implied that Samyaza was going to be great, someone like the prince Uriel, and at this, the novice felt a little warmth in his chest.

Samyaza had hoped so, he'd hoped to be special in a sea of angels, all so different, all so the same.

Heavily, the leader of the Watchers began to tread along, broken but not so much that he was as good as dead. It felt like a curse — the closeness to death. He turned, saw, and heard the guttural, unrestrained wails of humans, and at the same time, he clutched at his chest, in the pain of both his flesh and soul. At either side of him there was the noise of suffering, the cracks of huts continuing to cave into themselves, many now entirely missing and leaving spheres of black charred onto the ground. The angel ran his gaze between them, seeing more and more bodies, some reaching out for him, asking for help from the same one who had, in their eyes, saved them from the demons.

His ears were ringing, but he heard a voice coming through. It was so muffled that the words were indecipherable, but he'd nonetheless known the call was directed at him. So, he stopped walking, turned, looked down this road of dirt, seeing a child running toward him, watching her latch onto his robe before he felt her hands or her body against his own. He whispered her name; it was Idith's second oldest. "You're alright," he blurted. "You're safe. I'm here. Where is your mother?" He blinked, as many times as he could, intent suddenly on stirring free from the chains that placed him far from the sounds, the sights, the world before him. For the daughter of his wife, for his wife, Samyaza forced a cough, as if to spew all the fire in his lungs, and he heard the girl crying, taking his arm and pulling him. She was speaking; Samyaza followed her, not making out a word of it.

'God,' Samyaza thought, but nothing more than that. Did he dare to speak ill of Him? He never had. 'God, God, God!' No words could do justice to the horror. 'God!'

Idith wasn't dead — it was a relief, Samyaza was still so numb to the world that he would have torn out his tongue, his eyes, if he couldn't feel enough to take in the corpse of his wife. But, she was alive, moving, lifting her head and crying out scathingly into the sky like Samyaza wanted to; on her knees, she did it, a cheek embraced by swollen redness. In her arms — a carcass. It was, indeed, a carcass before it was anything else — it was dead and open with death, bursting wrin-

kled and tubular in between pink-flesh pouches oozing the red death within. Intestines are so lifeless, though they're the heart of life; they lay limp when seen, grow still beneath a gaze unshielded by skin.

But after it was dead, it was a girl or a woman — they didn't have a word for what lay in between. Samyaza wished now he could have asked her, the days after she had bled and cramped — would she have comfortably called herself a woman now? She seemed too small for it, too young in her rounded cheeks still. He remembered his youth, the fear of responsibilities — but angels, at least, were not damned to watch their body change into that of a stranger in the march toward their graves.

He fell to his knees, and Idith, trembling, was nudging her daughter's body against his; her open abdomen spilled some more, like a teacup overbrimming. But Samyaza shook his aching head, face contorting in his misery. "No," he breathed. "I can't." He couldn't bring back the dead.

The other daughter, the one who'd led him here, held her mother, and the three looked down at the corpse of a girl, saying her name, confused at the goodness of God, that which Samyaza had told them of, which the Watchers had spoken of, shared the news of with all the humans. Where was it now? Why had He sent those angels? Samyaza flickered his gaze to the village he had arrived in months ago — leveled and disgorged with screams of grief-heavy agony. From here, he could see it was more grief than dying — and maybe this was where the mercy of God was. He saw death, saw it at every corner, every living human wailing just like his wife and the Watchers weeping for those they had come to love. But, Samyaza hardly saw injury. There was no rush for Samyaza's healing like there had been when the demons attacked; the angels had killed with intent, had been purposeful in being lethal.

They knew Samyaza could heal; they knew that angels could usher in miracles; but angels could not bring back the dead.

Then, Enoch appeared. "Angel!" The leader of the Watchers heard the calls, a hand near his chest, feeling little at the same time he felt too much — these forces meeting and then chasing another beneath his skin so a whirlwind may have begun inside him, urging him to move,

to do anything other than remain on his knees and cry. Yet, he lifted his chin, saw the old man as he approached, not injured, his colorless hair frizzled and clouding his head, his clothes barely more than stained by dirt. At his sides — his sons, five of them total, looking more frazzled than their grandfather, great-grandfather; they looked wary, some relieved at the sight of the angel. Enoch, however, was livid in the eyes, the teeth-bared mouth. When he lunged at Samyaza, he threw out both his hands, trying to shove the Watcher back, but Samyaza merely wobbled, then set a foot behind him and straightened to stand. Another attempt at a shove. Samyaza took another step back before Enoch was throwing out his fists, striking Samyaza all over the chest, each hit like thumps against bark.

“Enoch,” Samyaza barely managed, then he clenched his eyes shut, shivering when spit landed on his cheek, drooled down sticky onto his chin.

“I said you were a blessing once,” said Enoch — Samyaza thought that Enoch had been so jolly once — “but now it’s clear to me that you were sent by the devil.”

When Samyaza met Enoch’s furious, flamed eyes — the anger in them was feral. He reached, flicking his wrist by his face to wipe at the saliva. Low, cold, he replied, “I’m an angel.” He was. “Not a demon, not a fallen thing damned by God. I don’t know why this happened either—”

“You do know,” Enoch snarled. “You know what did this.”

Glancing beside him, Samyaza caught his wife, her daughters, his daughters. “No,” he replied, turning back to the elder. “I don’t. Enoch, you’re just a human. You think your age gives you wisdom? I was here before you, before your Earth. I was there at the dawn of life on this ground, and your life will be so short that it will be completely insignificant to me for the rest of eternity that I’m here.” He didn’t think of his wife, didn’t dare consider her mortality now even as she clutched the stark reminder of it. “Now, do something to help your people, or banish yourself from this village you are leaving to burn!”

It wasn’t an audience that formed, but a few dozen humans had approached, and with them, four or so Watchers, those not caught up in woe.

Samyaza caught Enoch's gaze flickering, from him to those he had been the sole authority among for what must've been many decades at least, before the angel went on: "After two attacks, I see that this area is not safe, at least not now. And with all the houses destroyed, there's little to keep you all here." Gesturing — "The crops are burnt, the cattle are dead." And being devoured by insects already, eager to make something out of the violence angels had left in their wake. "The river must be dirty from all the humans jumping into it." He examined his surroundings, more humans were coming nearer, and he thought that it would be easier to count the living than to count the dead. "When demons attacked, we relied on the other tribes to feed you all. This time, we should ask them to shelter us. We angels will build huts wherever they are. This is our only recourse—"

Enoch said, "Those that attacked us now — those were angels."

Samyaza replied, "We Watchers are angels." It wasn't a growl, but it was rough, sharp. "And you are a human, and you will listen to what I say, you will do as I've instructed, you will help." His fingers trembled, itching to grab, maybe shove the old man as he had done to him. But he could kill him; he was an angel, Enoch was a fragile, sanctimonious man, and Samyaza was an angel, a piece of God. Slowly, he added, "Gather all the humans, tell them to get the last of their belongings, and we'll set out immediately. Do as we angels say, and all will be well."

Enoch was quiet, but he turned to the crowd and stared for a long moment, before he began to walk, with his sons in tow — Methuselah, Noah, and others. Only vaguely hearing Enoch grumble out orders to do as Samyaza instructed, the angel returned to his wife. He took her in his arms, kissed her hair, and stared down miserably at the ruins left of his daughter. He said they should burn her, that they should burn everyone, but when Idith didn't reply, Samyaza didn't argue. He stepped away, and when the humans asked if they had the time to burn their loved ones, he told them to hurry before going to gather angels to help filter through debris for survivors.

Far away — "Oh," against a pair of lips. "Your people are next. The chief archangel. He's going to kill some of your humans. Maybe you should try to stop him."

Baraquel instantly wretched himself back, the sudden influx of air

rattling his body, as he panted, his face flushed, as he stared at the angel he was on his side with, one white wing lovingly draped over them both. “Hm?” Seconds ago, his tongue had been tied to Kokabiel’s but now his words were in his throat, and he jolted when the angel of stars suddenly rolled over, on top, then perched on his lap.

“Michael,” said Kokabiel, then smiled lightly. “He’s come punish us and the humans we’ve married. Maybe you should return to your village.” He paused, then reached downward to take tight hold of them both — they were naked, their clothes right nearby. The marsh smelled wet, earthly, and Kokabiel smelled like cinnamon. “Or stay here with me.” His red wings fluttered behind him, and Baraqiel felt his shoulders tremble. “It may be too late to save anyone. So stay here. You can be inside me this time.”

Baraqiel murmured. “But what are you saying, Kokabiel—?”

The angel of stars worked his hand slow, painfully. “It’s a nice, tight hold inside me. I think you would like it.” He leaned down, took Baraqiel’s mouth again, his teeth taking the bottom lip and tugging like he were pulling a leash. “It’ll warm you up, and you don’t have to move. I just want to hold you, like a stem holds a flower.”

Baraqiel swallowed, shuddering then turning his head away, feeling the damp grass caressing his ears. “I just married. Yesterday. I wanted to tell you earlier.”

“I’m married too. She would like you.”

“Koka, what did you mean about Michael?” Baraqiel lifted a hand slow, settled it on the hip of his friend. “We shouldn’t— I don’t think we should—” But Kokabiel was staring at him, and he looked like he had during the war, beneath the dark with its leaking stars, leaking bright nebula; it had been the moment they met. Kokabiel pecked a kiss, humming against him, and Baraqiel closed his eyes, hoping the promise of warmth would be enough for his fears. If Kokabiel was telling him to forget about the humans under his care, even if they were being slaughtered, then he would. ‘I’d forget anything you asked me to.’

Whereas Samyaza had just finished packing his few belongings into the same bag he’d brought to Earth when he arrived; he was thinking of the Watchers in other tribes. Hopefully, they would be able to do more

against Michael than he had. He lifted his bag, placed the single strap over one shoulder, then stepped out, began walking. His wife was near the front of the forming caravan beside another Watcher with his own partner at his side, and Idith's three remaining children. In her arms, there was a bundle of white cloth in the shape of a daughter.

"Adam," she said, once Samyaza had reached them, her eyes hollow. "Adam's city will take us in."

Samyaza nodded and shouted for the crowd's attention as yet another Watcher moved closer to him, holding a slab of bark lit at its end. He touched the arm of the chief of the Watchers, handed him the torch, then they all rose to the sky with a few flaps of their wings. It was here that Samyaza realized that Enoch's entire community was quite large, and even despite attacks from demons and angels, they were so sizable that surely they couldn't all be killed. It would take an event like the fall of Satan that had ravaged the whole Earth in flames to kill them; the Lord wouldn't set the Earth alight once more, would He? Below, some humans looked up at the Watchers with glimmers of anger, and even jealousy, and Samyaza met this with a shuddering breath. He ordered everyone forward, ordered the caravan to remain orderly the entire few days it would take to reach the city of Adam.

And it was a few hours into this trip, the moon in waning zenith, that Samyaza finally looked to the Watchers, and —

'Azazel?' He whipped his head around, watching the crowd; surely, Azazel was among them. He kept scanning, searching, but refused to leave his place leading everyone ahead. 'Azazel, you must be with your wife—' He remembered their conversation before Michael had arrived. 'No. He's with a man.' And, abrupt, his eyes begin narrowing, the end of his lips twitching. 'A worthless human man? Why would Azazel be with a man?' Samyaza turned to ask one of the angels beside him, but he remembered that Azazel was a sinner. Certainly, the angels would say, 'Azazel? Maybe he helped destroy the village. Maybe he ran away. It's good that he's gone! Who cares about that whore?'

'I do,' Samyaza answered the angels in his head. 'Where is he?!' There was some noise, humans conversing, and just at that, Samyaza realized it — the hunters. He searched the crowd for hunters and quickly saw their chief Eitan between a child and an elderly woman.

‘Just another hour or so, then we’ll allow the humans to rest,’ he told himself. Before Eitan could sleep, he would grab and shake him, demanding to know where Azazel might have gone.

Though, within a few days, Armoni heard the first reports of humans approaching. He was sat beside the sleeping Adam and knitting a shawl; it was a simple beige color, made from the wool that another tribe had traded for food. Of all things, Adam’s city was most abundant in food; though there were little to no cattle, the descendants of Cain had a plethora of crops in fields right outside their city’s walls and within their many gardens scattered throughout. Adam had once mumbled that Cain never developed any liking for meat, and his descendants remained with a strong preference for what grew from the soil.

Now there were three men at the doorway, along with Adam’s great-granddaughter, Miriam, who was characteristically hiding behind her family but sneaking glances at the angel. When they delivered the news of Enoch’s people at their door, Armoni met it with a nod, standing, smoothing down his tunic. With a nod at the snoring Adam, he mumbled, “It’s a shame, I was about to take him on his nightly walk.” Armoni stretched his arms over his head with a yawn, hearing the jade earrings that the old man had offered him rattle.

‘I never did like jade,’ he thought, ‘but these are not so bad. They don’t even feel as if they were made by humans.’

“It looks to be your leader,” said one of the young men. “But he’s not alone, it could be hundreds with him, maybe thousands.” The little wobble in his voice made it clear that the latter was more accurate.

Armoni pouted a bit. “I see. In that case, I should meet him myself.”

Miriam timidly asked, “Should we call for the other angels?”

Humming, Armoni began walking, brushing past both her and the men. “That would be helpful.” He added no more, stepping out into the hall he’d grown so intimately familiar with, moving past the monstrous murals, into the entrance, then out of it. Armoni often wondered why the people of Enoch lived in those huts when they could simply join Adam’s city and aid in making it greater. Maybe mingling with the blood of Cain felt too blasphemous to their God,

but if all human blood was already stained with original sin, then what were they so afraid of?

As Armoni walked, he heard the quick footsteps of someone hurrying behind, sandals striking the cobbled road. He didn't turn but recognized her shaky voice. Miriam. "Armoni, do you think something's wrong? Should I wake Adam?"

"Let the old man sleep," the angel replied, seeing the stone wall that they came upon, the gate already open. "Even if there's something terribly wrong, what could he do about it?"

"He's very wise."

"I'm sure he is," Armoni contended, "but he's older than he's wise. Let him sleep." It was left unsaid, but he knew from her sigh that she understood. 'Let him die,' he kept a secret between them.

"For an angel, you're cruel."

"It's cruel to keep a man who wants to rest awake," Armoni replied, brows furrowing. He heard her siblings come up behind them at the same time that some flying Watchers landed before the crowd of humans, all looking — Armoni thought — dirty and disarrayed in their hair and attire. It was from within the sea of them that Samyaza snaked out, rushing forward, looking as exhausted in his face as Enoch's people. At this, Armoni couldn't resist a smirk. "Hello, Samyaza. What can my people do for you?"

"We need food."

"Naturally. A bath too?"

"Don't be funny, Armoni."

"Am I laughing? I mean it." Armoni gestured. "Your people smell, and we have open bathhouses. We can arrange a place for them to sleep too, I believe." He would deal with this quickly, he always did. "Come, Samyaza, let me introduce you to the men." He caught the hints of relief on the chief of the Watcher's face before he scanned over every human and angel that had come. "Oh and Azazel, is he with you?"

"No," Samyaza replied, his voice both serious and strained, fear on its syllables. "He was chased by one of Michael's angels. And now he's disappeared."

CHAPTER 20



For the first time in days, Azazel didn't rouse from sleep to Rosier's gentle touch. He wasn't terribly surprised but still turned to lie, as if dead, on the bedding with a frown, cheek on a horribly soft cotton pillow. The blankets, too, were violent with their warmth, thick and lined with furs; they imprisoned him snugly in a current he wasn't sure he could escape the grapples of. Tiredly, Azazel stared at the thin, silk sheet that Rosier had hung up on a string — this to offer him a little semblance of privacy.

'I think he's the one,' Azazel thought, 'that wants privacy.' After all, Azazel had spent every night for the past two weeks listening to Asmodeus and Rosier climb into bed together; he had heard them shift and whisper in the darkness — Asmodeus warning that the devil wouldn't ignore Azazel's presence much longer, and Rosier replying that he was worried Satan would send wolves after Azazel once he stepped into the forests of Mount Hermon. The evening prior, Azazel had waited for the usual noise of the two to lull him to sleep, but instead, there had been quieter words passing between the demons, the creak of the bed, then the distinctive sound of lips, touching, pressing, coming apart, then piecing back together again.

Slow, Azazel had turned his head, lifted a tepid hand and taken the

edge of the curtain, tugging it aside. With every candle and the fireplace burnt out, the bedroom was enshrouded in darkness but not blindingly so; he saw two figures, one laying on his side with his head over the ram-horned one on his back. The demon above tenderly held the face of the other and made a low, throaty noise of need. In response, Rosier sighed and continued to twirl a strand of Asmodeus' hair affectionately.

Azazel wasn't sure why he watched, if the twist of his stomach was confusion or fear, but he saw the two demons kiss once more, lips carving deeper, before Asmodeus turned downward and peppered kisses onto Rosier's neck. It must've felt wonderfully warm there, stifled gasps trembling a throat against a hungry mouth — but the love-spoiled demon soon flickered his gaze to Azazel. And Rosier's eyes widened before Azazel could think to hide. They stared at each other, Rosier suddenly grimacing just as Asmodeus' mouth dragged up to his chin, following the jawline to his ear. His teeth must've grazed him; he must've murmured, "*Rosier,*" or "*Turn over for me, darling.*"

Instantly, the angel had pinned his body back to the bed, both hands gripping the blankets and wrenching them higher. Screwing his eyes shut, he'd tried to ignore the noises still filtering in — hushed coos and bare skin sliding. But Rosier was soon telling Asmodeus to stop, that they should get as much rest as they could. Silence had followed, but ever brief. Asmodeus kissed Rosier one last time, then agreed.

Now, the angel was crawling along the bed, reaching for the clothes he'd arrived in, set on the stool where all his few belongings were balanced. Hastily, he pulled a billowy tunic over his head that Rosier had lent him, but then hesitated, sitting naked, an odd grimace over his face. 'I've wasted enough time here.' If Satan sent whatever beasts he liked after him, then so be it. 'I'm sure Asmodeus is planning to banish me soon regardless.' He pulled on his drapery with his brows still furrowed, then reached to untie the silk cloth over his hair. Rosier had braided it the afternoon before — while Asmodeus had relaxed on the carpet and smoked — and Azazel presently adjusted those braids, trying not to think of how lovely they were, how reminiscent of an ancient paradise.

‘I must leave this place now or I never will.’ He yanked on the curtain, then stepped into the center of the room with a stirring belly. It wasn’t grumbling quite yet, but he was licking his lips, imagining the taste of Heaven’s ambrosia. ‘It’s bad,’ he thought, ‘staying here — I’m falling back into my Heaven ways. Rosier has been feeding me too much.’ He wanted to eat something good — ‘Is that spices I smell?’ — and he wanted to lazy away in bed, dress in all the jewels the demons donned, lay on his side, bring grapes to his painted lips. But he’d lost that Heaven a long time ago, and though there were traces of it here, among the demons, their paradise was rot.

Slipping on his sandals, Azazel made his way past the fireplace, out the door. He had to find Rosier and bid him goodbye. He stepped into the alleyways that made up this cave system he’d now learned the demons had constructed. Most cave systems, he’d also learned, are demon-made. Suppressing any sign of his nerves, the angel began walking, saw a few demons stepping out of other rooms themselves or already in the hall, bickering, discussing, in between all the luxury of their faux utopia. And yet Azazel couldn’t help but think of how he, and all the angels in Heaven, had insisted the fallen demons were burning, were suffering. ‘But here they are laughing and—’

Azazel lowered his gaze, avoiding the sight, trying to stagger back as he heard a languid moan from the demon who’d just been pressed against the wall up ahead by another — both with open robes, exposing every pinch of themselves. The trapped one, however, continued spurring on the other, laughing out sweetly laced insults: “Is that how you fuck? You might as well have stayed in Heaven with your cock in a cage.”

Immediately, there were groans and complaints from other demons in the halls, shouting for those two to find a better place to fornicate. Some part of Azazel was relieved at this, taking it as evidence that maybe the demons were only partially beasts and that they held some regard for public decency still. Regardless, the angel scrunched his nose and tried shifting his attention to a shorter hallway to his right, then beginning toward it. It led him, almost instantaneously, to a dead end, but he heard a sudden “*Rosier—*” come from his left. He twisted

another time, moving past a simple archway and parted curtain into what seemed a lounge of some sort.

Sprawling smoke introduced itself first. By a towering jade hookah, four demons were draped in their crude mixture of ancient angelic beauty and demonic malformation, as well as seated over plush, pillow-hefty sofas. Some were, also, on the ground, over two furred animal skins; one of these demons was strumming a large stringed instrument in his hands, humming but releasing no discernible words. Through the white-gray haze, there were painted cave walls and half-eaten dishes of grilled meat atop some of the furniture.

Two demons were in the middle of a discussion; the speaking one had pursed, red-painted lips, and he fiddled with the handle of one of the hookah's hoses as he whined. "But last time Asmodeus fucked me, it was in that damn orgy room." He was blonde-haired, though excessively styled to accentuate its volume, and dressed in more jewelry chains than proper clothing.

"Since when do you like private, tender fucking?" This other demon was red-haired and better dressed, but his clothes were form-fitting and tied tight at his waist, too tight perhaps. "Or," hacking, twirling his own hose, "have you grown soft, darling? Do you want to be cuddled in bed too?"

"What I want," snapped the first one, "is to know what Asmodeus sees in that whore, Ara."

"Rosier's no whore," laughed the other once again.

"Emotional whore!"

"Gemory, one day I will no longer be able to tolerate your drama."

"I hate Rosier. There, I said it," Gemory replied simply. "He must think he looks so sweet — walking around with his fruits and his innocent face. And he thinks he's untouchable because Satan likes him. I've always said that we should banish him for not acting like a proper demon."

"Sounds like jealousy to me, dear."

Azazel cleared his throat, stepping onto a brown bear skin, calling the attention of the two chattering demons. "I'm sorry," he said, though his lips had dropped into an irked frown. "You mentioned Rosier."

"Oh, now the real angel is here!" Gemory lamented dramatically, but his friend waved an amicable hand, calling Azazel closer.

Azazel huffed. "The faster you tell me where Rosier is, the faster I'll be able to leave."

"Well," replied the kinder demon, named Ara, "I think I saw him heading for Satan's chambers. It's probably best to leave without telling Rosier, then. Unless you want to try speaking to the devil yourself." He brought his pipe to his lips. "I assume you don't."

"Why did you stay so long?" Gemory now asked. "I heard that our devil screamed at you."

Azazel had no good reason. "It was Rosier. He insisted. But I want to go back now, back to my husband." He liked saying *husband*; it felt right in his mouth. "I'd like to tell Rosier, so that he doesn't worry over me."

Gemory opened his mouth, but the demon at his side shushed him quick and said, "Don't be rude, girl. We've bothered him long enough."

Azazel perked up at that, just as Ara blew out some smoke again. "Girl? What girl?"

Laughing, Gemory teased, "Aren't we all girls?"

Now a third demon called out, from another couch, "Speak for yourself, Gemory! Some of us demons are women."

"You're not women," Azazel argued. "You're a demon."

"Can't us demons be women too?" Gemory sighed theatrically. "I think I fit the role of a woman so well!" Behind Azazel, a presence approached. "I suppose you don't understand since you've only been on Earth a short time. Everything here is man or woman, except for us demons, so it's fun to pretend, to dress up. Come to one of our shows, one day, and you'll see how much fun it is." After this, he, she, paused, lingering for some seconds before speaking much softer. "Azazel, whatever happened to you? I remember you used to paint your face. Darling, I wouldn't even know how to do it to myself if you hadn't taught everyone in Heaven! And look at you now in that ugly drab. Who are you? What have you done to Azazel?"

Azazel almost grimaced, realizing that the demons didn't, couldn't, know what became of Heaven, and he stepped back, feeling his heart

clench, thinking of how he'd awoken with the inkling of the ancient warmth and leisure of paradise on his tongue. 'Maybe Heaven wasn't destroyed,' he thought, angry, 'they stole it — the demons took it down with them.'

"Azazel?"

Whipping around, the angel felt as if his blood had run from him, and he remained a husk there, his lungs empty, his eyes glazed, barely catching the sight before him — the demon. Only barely, he heard his own voice, hushed and strained: "Mammon?"

Mammon was arms-crossed, one foot dragging idly against the ground, his face saddened, his mouth a thin crescent on the verge of falling, frowning. "Hello," was the greeting from lips torn by the sharp teeth that stuck out through it. Yet, as far as demons go, he was not much of a beast; he lacked a tail and horns. Though, he had dyed his skin in places, stitched it — all permanent malformations.

Azazel shook his head, staggering backward with a laugh that bordered on hysterical. "No." 'Monster.' "Don't talk to me." He hurried to the doorway, feeling claws brush the skin of his shoulder but that only made him move along quicker. "Don't you dare—!" He entered the corridor, thinking he had to run away from the demon who'd destroyed his purity, destroyed the sweet life he had, ruined God's paradise.

"Azazel, please, let me talk to you." The demon grabbed his arm entirely, stopping the angel by a mounted torch — a shadow of fire squirming on Mammon's face in much the same way Azazel was currently doing in his grip.

Twisting, pulling, he snarled at the demon, "How dare you touch me! Was my virginity not enough for you? In Heaven's eyes, you made me into a whore!"

Mammon's face twitched, eyebrows raised, but he didn't release him "What?"

"All the angels," Azazel said, teeth clenched, "called me a whore. I had to confess to God what I'd done. And the Lord forgave me, or so He said, but my life became dreadful. You don't understand. You could never understand. You acted selfishly, and you damned me!"

"I thought," Mammon began, slow, "that you'd fall too." His hold

loosened, and he glanced over Azazel's shoulder but only quickly. "I didn't know what would happen when we fell, but I thought I wouldn't mind anything if you were with me." Azazel returned to shaking his head. "Azazel, please."

And now Rosier, of all demons, had walked up, appearing right at their side, looking curious and turning between the two of them. When he faced the angel, he asked, "Are you okay? What's wrong?"

Azazel answered firmly, "I need to leave." He stepped away from Mammon, tearing his arm free from his grip.

Mammon was saying, "You could stay, Azazel! What's an angel doing being with a man? I could take care of you now. I have two others, but you were my first." The angel scoffed. "You have my heart still."

"I'll leave it in the woods for you," Azazel snapped, beginning to walk, hoping to retrace his steps back to the room where he'd woken up, but Rosier hurried to him, gently laid his fingers over his forearm.

"Do you," Rosier whispered, moving with him down the hall, "really want to go?" Quietly, Azazel whispered that he would; he'd been here too long, and he missed his husband, though he was thankful for the hospitality. "I understand. I just spoke with Lucifer, and I think he's very distracted, so it should be safe. But I'll miss you. I don't know what's happening between God, and the angels, and the humans, but you'll always have a home with us demons."

Azazel replied quietly, "Thank you, but I belong in Heaven."

Rosier parted his lips to speak, but then he didn't. He said nothing else as they made their way back, holding the door open for Azazel, and then stepping inside to go about the bedroom. He took various trinkets from different corners, stuffing them into a velvet sack no larger than his head. Quickly, he pulled on the gold threads to close it tightly, then sighed, standing by the fireplace, his eyes so sad that Azazel felt a tinge of guilt rattle in his throat. Before he could ask, the demon had pressed the pouch into the angel's hands.

Azazel asked, "What is this?"

"It's just a few things. I know the humans don't have much, so I thought you'd like an extra tunic, a little jewelry, some dried meat, and some paints."

Azazel's lips twitched. "I heard some demons say that you still act like an angel. I see now that it's true." Rosier laughed, a bit weakly but didn't reply as the angel clutched the sack close to him. "I'll see you again. I promise." He leaned in, kissed his friend's cheek, and soon felt Rosier turn his head to press his mouth to his own jaw. "Mm. Thank you for everything."

"Let me walk you," Rosier replied, his voice as gloomy as the curve in his brows, his sullen eyes. "It's difficult to find the way out."

Azazel nodded, and as they headed toward the door, he brushed the side of the bed, where he'd always heard Rosier and Asmodeus sleep, and he remembered the night before. Out in the corridor, listening to the torches and their flames chatter — Azazel reeled in a deep breath, letting it fill his lungs. He said, "Rosier, I really am happy you're okay." He noticed small earrings, with pearls, stuck in his friend's ears. "I feel like I haven't said that. Last time we saw each other, you seemed like a shadow of yourself."

"I felt like one," Rosier responded with a hint of humor. "You said you hate it here. Well, it all used to be miserable, and now everything is a lot nicer. So, I'm very happy."

"But," Azazel continued, "you had a head with you." The little joy in Rosier's eyes dimmed, then died. "You told me it was Asmodeus. You told me he hurt you." Azazel hadn't known how then, but he had some guesses now. "Did you forgive him?"

Rosier led him down another way, saying, "I try not to think about those times, Azazel." Azazel asked what times. "The time before now. Demons know that God is all-powerful and that, one day, He might do away with us forever." His voice was soft, sweet, but terribly fragile, holding onto itself by its nails, about to fall. "It's better not to think about all the bad things that have happened. It's better to be happy with what we have." 'You're not,' Azazel thought, 'answering my question, Rosier. Did you forgive him?' "There's no point in lingering."

"Rosier—"

"Azazel, tell me more about your man," the demon cut in, quickly though his voice remained thin, and the angel knew better than to press this further. He'd, frankly, had a tiring day of too many strange conversations, and if he wasn't sure when he'd see Rosier again, it was

better to take the chance to be happy, to be kind. “Well, he’s very good-looking.” Maybe he could perfectly understand Rosier’s desire to never think of the past.

Hearing his friend’s airy laughter, Azazel kept talking, telling him everything that he could, every detail about the man, down to the lines by his eyes, the signs of age that he noticed on him, the way he smelled, the way he grunted and walked with a little skip, the way he was such a *man* in all that he did. And Rosier teased Azazel, calling him an angel of love, and they laughed together. It was familiar; ‘if I close my eyes, and I don’t see your horns, it’s like we’re in Heaven, and you’ve come to feed me fruits, and we’re gossiping about meaningless things.’

They bid farewell as they stepped out from the caves, through a thin fissure between two boulders out into the forestry of Mount Hermon. They squeezed each other’s hands, kissed one another’s cheeks again, and then waved as Azazel began to walk away from him with the velvet pouch he’d been gifted. Brisk, wet — the smell of the trees greeted him, and Azazel breathed it in with some relief. It was a long way back to the village, but he knew he wouldn’t mind taking the time to have a little solitude and think.

The solitude, however, didn’t last long.

Just as Azazel was nearly out of the woods toward what remained of Enoch’s village, he heard shouts of his name. He turned to the side quickly, began rushing, yelling back, “Armoni?! Eitan?!” A combination he’d never expected, but he didn’t care to think that now. He shoved the last branches out of his way, feeling them drag harsh on his sleeves but not tear, and he hopped over a log, ducked beneath the arms of trees that seemed too sturdy to push away. Once he was hurrying past the river, approaching crumbled huts — he saw the angel and man by some burned debris. He didn’t hesitate to grin, to attempt tackling them both only to fail. So, he hugged his husband as tight he could, then he turned and hugged Armoni, as well.

Armoni groaned, arms caught at his sides in the embrace. “You have to explain everything immediately.”

“I will, I will,” Azazel laughed, kissing the cheek of his frazzled friend, then turning and smiling at Eitan, who was dressed in the same

cape and loincloth he wore whenever he hunted. “You shouldn’t have returned for me, but I’m very moved that you did.”

Eitan reached, grabbed Azazel’s hand, tugged him closer, then he kissed his mouth — quick, sweet. His eyes were warm, his smile gentle. “You don’t know how worried I was.”

“Well,” said another voice, and Azazel looked to see the chief of the Watchers, standing there stiff, both hands behind his back, coughing some. “It’s good to see you’re safe. Azazel.”

CHAPTER 21



Grunting, Baal lifted his foot out of a putrid pile of dung latched onto his shoe, then grimaced. He trekked closer to a tree and scrapped his boot against it, muttering viciously to himself. He'd be angrier if he weren't so close to home already — was even staring directly at one of the narrow, high cliffside entrances amid the darkness hanging densely over the mountain. All throughout the air, too, there were sharp and low animal howls, the loudest certainly from one of the giant mammals the demons had passed minutes ago. Some leaves rustled, the forest cooing as she stirred in her slumber.

"Baal," called Moloch, one of two dozen demons behind him. "Should we report to Satan now or tomorrow?"

Glancing upward, taking in the stars, each like a beady eye itself, blinking down at him — "The sun will rise soon," Baal grumbled, listening to the scratch of his leather shoe on the bark. "I can wake him and tell him what there is to know." He set his boot down, flicked his tail idly. "Unless any of you saw something important." He turned at this and stared at his legion.

A demon replied, "I heard from a tribe that Enoch's people left their settlement."

"Stupid fucker. Is this your first time leaving the caves?" Baal jabbed, twisting back around as the other demons chortled among

themselves. "We've known that for a month now. And so has Satan." With a roll of his shoulders, he called his wings out of his back, the skin there straining but so scarred now, so accustomed to pain now. The thin, bat-ish limbs slithered out easily, a red so dark it was nearly onyx, and they twitched close by him.

The insulted demon barked back, "I was going to say something else— I—" The crunch of grass beneath his hooved feet. "I was going to say that they're with Cain's people now."

"That's where I was," Baal answered, flat, rough. He remembered: 'All of Enoch's vermin built huts on the outskirts of Cain's city.' And though Cain's people had offered them houses and rooms to sleep in, Enoch's people turned their noses away and called them dirty. Frowning his brow, Baal looked down at his feet, at the boot he'd been cleaning. 'Enoch's vermin, Enoch's shit,' he amended. He flapped his wings, rising past some branches at the same moment he yelled, "Go away, all of you! Take the other entrance!" He needed silence, needed to be away from all the brainless husks of meat the demons were. "If I need any more stupid fucking comments, I'll call for you again." And he needed to see Lucifer.

Some chuckled behind him, some groaned, but his followers remained where they were as Baal struck his wings stronger, lifting himself into the cool air above the trees, not far from the cliffside. He met the horizon, saw more mountains in the distance and a sea, further away. There were beams of light there, as well, intruding on the abyss holding the stars. Morning — on its march. Swerving, Baal made his way to the entrance, diving toward it, pulling in his wings just as he landed roughly on the steep side, right beside the narrow fissure. He held on with a hand, digging his talons into the rocks and hearing some of the stone come loose to plunge far down the mountain. Rather awkwardly, he scooted along, slipping between the rocks, grunting at the squeeze.

It was, of all the entrances, likely the worst and most uncomfortable, but Baal supposed that was its purpose, as it was the nearest to Satan's chambers at the heart of Mount Hermon. He shuffled into a wider space, though not much wider, where a demon was sat on a cushioned chair, legs crossed, one hand flipping through some parch-

ment. With his other fingers, he twirled a paintbrush and spared Baal a look, then instantly turned back to his handiwork with a certain boredom. Snorting, Baal greeted, “Morning.”

The guard asked, “Where are the others?”

Baal strolled past and smiled broadly. “Fucking each other in the woods.” Then, he squeezed through yet another narrow passage to enter the familiar halls of the demons’ abode. The murals at his side were more grotesque than the artwork elsewhere — fallen angels in the midst of manic war, tearing one another into mere remains of what they’d once been, butchering the animals that roamed the land with them. From the beasts — they further disfigured their bodies but often with relief and joy.

Once, the devil had sat with them, lifted a guiding hand, and said: “Your body is yours, not His. Don’t hold any shame in your heart to remake the prison of your flesh. Become unrecognizable to the God that has forsaken you. Take divine creation into your own hands.”

Approaching the chambers of the king of the demons, the number of guards dispersed throughout the widening corridors increased exponentially, though they didn’t seem particularly stiff. A few stood armed beneath the points of stalactites while others were seated on painted stone benches, playing with marbles. Not far from them were mammoth double doors bordered by a complex jade sculpture of creeping plants, interwoven with creatures — animal and demonic ones alike — and golden decals. The doors themselves were carved obsidian with iron railings that could be locked but were, at this moment, free from each other’s clutches.

When the guards saw him, some stood from their post, leaning on their spears or holding up their mallets, axes, and machetes at their chest, as they bowed for him. They greeted him, gruffly; they called him duke. But Baal didn’t bother replying, going to the door, grabbing it by the iron, then beginning to pull it forward and apart. He groaned in effort as he did, the muscles in his arms aching, crying out to him that they would soon tear out through the skin he’d stitched together, but he endured until he’d opened it just wide enough. “Fuck.” His biceps prickled — yes, he was strong, he was muscular, but it was something he’d made for himself.

‘I remember cutting myself open and threading the muscles of beasts with my own. I wanted to be strong.’ Baal stepped inside, hearing the screech of the door as two guards shut it behind him. ‘I wanted to be the strongest of the demons for you.’ Raising, slow, his gaze — ‘Lucifer.’

Satan’s chambers were extravagant, densely populated with whatever treasures they discovered on the Earth — ornaments of topaz and diamond — as well as with the greatest demons’ woven workmanship — tapestries and cushions and carpets. Over the floor, there was a sleeping, giant leopard, which Baal stepped over the rumbling body of as he opted for a certain archway of the many leading into separate spaces — Satan’s bath, Satan’s lounge, Satan’s gardens. For such a monster, the devil’s bedroom was quite floral, some morning light already streaming in — from minuscule punctures in the ceiling — onto the massive circular bed of sapling bark and maybe two dozen pillows and several piled sheets, quilts, blankets. The walls were painted with lively flowers and vines rather than the beasts in the corridors, and a few pots of the same flora were littered about — magnolias and lilies and marigolds. There were several wardrobes lined along the right side of the room, all open and spilling like sea onto shore, with a dozen different mirrors nearby, some mounted, some floored.

And *Satan!* Oh, just the sight of him was enough for Baal to lose his balance, ever briefly, to feel an ache in his chest, to lean with abrupt weakness against a sturdy cave wall. Lucifer — tangled in the blankets, his delicate head cradled by two pillows, the wisps of golden hair splayed wild, not far from the shifting flowers that had made the headboard their home. As he slept, his face was calm, serene, pretty lips parted just a finger-width. And Baal swallowed, his heart flooding out and warming his cheeks. The thousands, maybe even millions, of times that he had caught this very sight — the devil in sweet dreaming — and yet it would never cease to be too, too, beautiful. He wanted to double over, shut his eyes; he wanted to hurry to the gem of his affections.

The angry and irritated bile that he’d come into the caves with — it was soon replaced by simple liking. Desire, a yearning, the mere thought to brush his skin on the devil; the kind of need that gnaws you out. Carefully, he stepped closer, slowly, lowering onto the mattress,

then leaning, breathing unsteady, his own vision blurring until he forced himself to shut it entirely. He pressed his lips to the devil's forehead, whispering against him, "Lucifer. It's morning." A soft, little noise replied. "I'm back now." He heard, then felt, Lucifer shift, and so he moved away, opening his eyes a sliver.

Lucifer dragged his arms along the mattress until they were up, over his head. "Mm." He stretched, opening his mouth and letting out another noise — this one deeper, tired — and afterward, Baal heard a few tiny chirps. Turning his head, he stared at the nest of twigs at Lucifer's bedside, where a small, plump bird flapped her wings but stayed in place over her presumed eggs. "All the demons have returned?" the devil replied, his voice gentle, sleepy.

"Yes." Unsure, one of Baal's hands reached, tugged back some of the blankets, glanced down at Satan's body in a simple tunic with a lace trim. "I told the demons to sleep." Gingerly, tenderly, he skimmed his clawed fingers up Lucifer's side. "Since there's nothing important to tell you about—"

"Nothing?" A cruel scoff, Lucifer's demeanor twisting like sudden eclipse; he slapped Baal's hand away, scratching sharp at his knuckles, inspiring a yelp as Baal jerked away. "What were you doing then? Wandering around in circles? Sucking each other off? You haven't given me any new information since Enoch's people moved to the Land of Nod. Has nothing happened since or is your head full of wolf shit?"

Baal reeled in a breath, but he took the insults without complaint, and chose to cradle his hand, though he wasn't bleeding. "No," he replied, "nothing has happened since then. I'm sure of it." Lucifer's face was made of narrowed eyes, clenched jaw, head slightly tilted forward as if he were eyeing prey; he was. "The Watchers go around, doing nothing. They fuck women, and then they sleep. They're worse than rats." The devil's silence persisted. "Well, a few are fucking men too, but only rarely and they keep that a secret."

"What do they see," Lucifer mused, "in humans, I wonder." Slow, but elegant, he moved away from Baal, off the bed, reaching the bird nest and raising a hand, bringing it to the mother's head. He dragged his fingers, delicate, against the bird's feathers.

Baal stared at his feet, his boots, then grumbled as he kicked them off. "What do they see in preferring women? Their leader, Samyaza — that's his name — despises the men. From what I gathered, it's because of Samyaza that the angels hide that they like riding human dick."

"Mm," Lucifer hummed once more. "I suppose it doesn't matter how exactly they're defiling themselves. All that matters to God is that they're impure now. I don't believe they're going to be allowed back into Heaven anytime soon."

Baal knew to hesitate, then — to turn the words in his lips slow like a needle on his tongue. "The chief archangel hasn't been seen again." He looked away from his bare, clawed feet; Lucifer had watched him shave off the tip hundreds of thousands of years ago and sear talons to his bone. "Or any of His angels either." The devil uttered no words at this, stepping further away, going to one of his wardrobes; Baal saw it as he turned his gaze but not much of his head, afraid he'd be snapped at.

Fingers delicate, Lucifer filtered through his outfits, then tugged out a thin robe, lavender, that Baal knew the devil often wore with a certain pair of filigree, dangling earrings. 'You always look pretty like that,' he thought hopelessly, feeling his body begin to slump before he allowed himself to flop onto the bed on his side. *Creak* — it squealed beneath, but the devil didn't face him. 'Come,' he wanted to say. 'Let me hold you.' He eyed every move of the devil's perfect body unbearably. 'I missed you. Please look at me. Let me kiss your nose, your cheeks.'

Satan said, "You should sleep," then left the bedroom, likely to wash. Shutting his eyes, Baal could only suppress a sigh. He grabbed one of the pillows that had cradled Satan's head, then he buried his face into it, tried to lose himself in the devil's lingering sweet scent — lavender with a touch of blood.

It was for two months or so that living remained this horrible.

In that time, Baal started to find himself defeated, sighing, and going to the largest arena more often to watch demons try to kill each other. So far, there had been no success, but if there was anything worth noting, it was that some demons had much easier times rebuilding than others. 'God didn't make us all equal, after all, did

He?’ Impatiently sipping some alcohol spun from agave, Baal moved between a few seats with his silver chalice, then settled at his regular place nearest to the smooth-stoned ground where three separate demons were attacking one another. The crowd was calm and not incredibly populated, though occasional cheers and insults sparked from the observers, one of whom was Asmodeus, already plopped in a chair right beside the bull-horned demon. He picked through a bowl of seasoned nuts and lugged around only a single cane today.

Without asking, Baal dipped his hand into the bowl, taking a few, then bringing him into his mouth. “Perfect, thank you, I love these.” He chewed loudly, looking over his friend’s shoulder. “Where’s Rosier?”

“He said he wanted to check on the crops.” Asmodeus settled his plate of nuts between them. “But that was in the morning; I’m sure he’s with Lucifer now.” He lowered a clawed hand to his cane and fiddled with it idly. “He said he might come join us, but I wouldn’t bet on it.” Ahead, two of the demons joined forces to pin one who fought and screeched.

Unsurprised, Baal made a gruff noise of affirmation, then took advantage to say, “I just spoke with Gemory.” Asmodeus groaned while the other demon laughed. “Damn, what have you done to him? Is it the mushrooms? The opium?”

“It’s called a good fucking,” Asmodeus said. “You wouldn’t understand.”

But Baal snickered, then nudged him flirtatiously. “Teach me then.”

Asmodeus barked out a laugh, though it was laced with a pinch of misery. “No. Don’t you see fucking every demon who asks is what keeps getting me into trouble?” Baal hardly saw Gemory as a threat, personally; he could remember an incident in the last century in which two of Asmodeus’ favorite cocksuckers started clawing each other’s faces off in a drunk, jealous stupor. “If everyone’s going to call me the duke of lust, then they should learn to leave love out of it.” Baal turned his attention back to the brawl amusedly while Asmodeus sought to change the subject. “Enough about that. Have you visited the humans recently?”

Baal replied with a grumble — “No sign of that bastard yet. But the moment I see him, I’ll tear him in half. I’ll rip off his wings and take them for my damn self.”

“I didn’t ask about Michael,” Asmodeus said. “The humans. The ones that the angels married. Have you looked at them closely?”

Confused — “No. Why?” Before them, the pinned demon began to wail in pain, kicking the ground, begging for mercy.

“I went out today,” Asmodeus answered, “and I saw a woman from one of the traveling tribes. I was going to dismember her.” Asmodeus, of course, was often out scavenging for organs, cooing out for women, and occasionally men, to follow his voice somewhere shadowed, then slaughtering them cleanly. “But she looked... different.” Baal asked what he meant, but Asmodeus looked over his shoulder, hesitated, and plainly replied, “Go and see it for yourself.” Waving his hand, he called, “Rosier, we’re over here.”

Baal turned his head and saw the curly-horned demon moving in between the seats toward them, smiling with the usual kindness. “Hello! I’m sorry I’m late. Lucifer was talking to the birds.” He scooted past, though not without leaning to peck a greeting kiss on Baal’s cheek. Settling right beside Asmodeus, Rosier smiled at the kisses his friend peppered onto his hair, while Baal sat in place with his brows furrowed. In front of them, the two attacking demons tried to kill their victim, but no matter how many times they stomped — the body continued to flail.

The following morning, Baal visited the city of Cain once more, staying on the outskirts as he’d always done, and stalked the huts. He caught Azazel, sweeping outside with a child, and he caught the leader of the Watchers, Samyaza. A woman was speaking to him, teasing him, one hand supporting her back. Staring, Baal swallowed, then snuck away again.

It wasn’t until several days later that Baal decided to tell Lucifer what he’d seen. He’d needed some time to look again on his own, afraid to be hasty with assumptions and face the wrath of the devil. ‘And if what I see is true, then what? What do we make of it?’ In the living area, he saw Lucifer, lying on his side, flipping through some bark paper — the reports from another demon duke. ‘We’re not angels, and

we're no friends of God. We don't have a stake in this.' Lucifer's gaze lifted to Baal, and he set his parchment down.

'Lucifer,' Baal thought once again, hopelessly. 'Lucifer.' He moved onto his knees before him, before the divan, and watched as Lucifer brought his hand to his face, letting his fingers skim his cheek, his jaw. Baal turned his head, kissed Satan's index chastely. He murmured, "You're beautiful." Lucifer said that he was. "You're more beautiful than the universe, more beautiful than God." He let out a breath, reaching for one of Lucifer's thighs, squeezing. "I love you." 'I'll die from loving you.' Demons who wasted their time trying to kill each other in combat were hopeless; Baal knew where to find death. 'Here.'

The devil sat upright, Baal moving between his pretty, parting legs, his claws pulling apart Satan's robe with sharp, but delicate, ease. Slow, he opened his mouth and allowed a beastly, long tongue to drape from his bottom lip before inching forward to flick his tongue, to lap and rouse the loveliest flesh God had ever woven to shiver against him. This wonderful taste of death.

Baal could worship Satan forever, 'all of eternity. I gave it to you.' His chest fluttered painfully; he shut his eyes; he wanted to sink his teeth into Lucifer, but he worked his coiling tongue instead. And he dragged his hand along from leg to hip until Lucifer took it, intertwined their fingers, exhaling low but refusing to let out a noise in pleasure.

"Good," Satan said, almost a coo but not quite. Baal was quite accustomed to this; he was happy to allow his own grunts to fill the silence, to choke when the devil's hips began to squirm. He would be happy to even suffocate, but Satan always denied him the pleasure. Within just another minute or two — "Enough." The order always came too quickly, Baal seizing, trying not to crush the perfect hand in his hold, trying not to slip one of Satan's legs between his own to rut wildly against like an animal.

Gasping — he hadn't taken a single breath since he fell to his knees — he removed his dampened mouth, only to grimace in need, to surge upward and press a kiss to the devil's drumming sternum. He gnawed at Satan's chest, though not anything sharper than an indent on the skin. 'You've marked me forever, but you won't let me mark you.'

Fingers found Baal's hair, scratching his scalp, his horns. "Lucifer," he hadn't meant to whisper.

Satan, gently, pushed his head back, slithered out from beneath him, and walked away with such elegance he may as well still be a serpent. With one hand, he pushed his robe off one shoulder, allowed the fabric to cascade down his figure onto the floor, and stepped into his bedroom in full nakedness, like divine nudity, like the Garden of Eden. And, finally, Baal staggered to his feet and hurried to see the beautiful faux angel settled on the bed. The pale sheets and pillows cradled him so amorously that Baal felt as if he were climbing onto a cloud with him. Quickly, he tore off his tunic, trying to join Satan in nakedness. Exposing himself in twitching and immodest hardened sin.

Baal took his ankles, chains pressing against his palms, and raised them by Lucifer's head, where a stern, domineering expression was perched. "Please," left Baal's desperate mouth, "please." He began rolling his hips, the tip of himself dribbling against the devil's perfect entrance. His mouth still tasted ambrosia.

Eventually, Lucifer allowed him inside, like worshiper into temple, and to finish each time, Baal begged too.

It was only hours later, after some washing and rest, that Baal confessed what he'd seen in Cain's city. Lucifer had just pulled on a crimson, draping robe and was adjusting his hair in a mirror, staring at himself, craning his neck around. "Hm? Is that so?"

Baal cleared his throat awkwardly. "Yes. That's what I saw."

With a sweet giggle, Lucifer handed him an order like he'd done in bed: "Hurry and put on some proper clothes. And get your weapons."

"Why?" Baal almost pouted. "What's happening?" "I wanted to lay together. Come. Let me rest my head on your chest."

"And gather me a human to devour. The ones imprisoned are still alive, aren't they?"

Without knowing why, Baal did exactly as told; he dressed, stepped out, and ordered guards to bring a human to slaughter in the throne room. He always followed orders, or at least tried. Lucifer, after all, would occasionally give him an impossible task then punish him severely when Baal, predictably, failed. And yet he always tried, always

wiped blood from his lips and returned to the devil's side, kissed him with the mouth just split in Satan's fits of rage.

It was by the throne that Baal met Lucifer again, saw him settle on his great chair, wearing now the coronet that gave him two pairs of horns. Like when the angel Azazel had wandered in, the leopards climbed onto the stage of the theater. Baal, confusedly, went to stand by Satan, asking "What is all this?" He could see some other demon dukes stepping inside, all looking as perplexed as him.

"You said," Satan replied, not looking at him, "that you believe Samyaza's wife is pregnant?"

At this, Baal almost flinched. "Yes."

"Then he must know it too."

Baal attempted to ask who, but the central doors soon opened again, and his heart stuttered, stopped, tore in half.

The chief prince — two angels at either of his sides — stepped once, twice, into the theater with all his armor, his cloak, his sword at his back. His eyes — locked shut behind the golden helmet. Like a mountain, the earth cracking at his feet, he stood still.

"Michael, my beloved" — Satan's voice was slow, slithering — "*damnation.*"

'Devil,' thought Michael.

CHAPTER 22



Despite the migration of Enoch's people, Samyaza decided Mount Hermon was still the best place for all the Watchers to gather again. And to Azazel's surprise, many of the angels invited their wives as they had done on the night of Michael's attack. While scaling up, between the crowded forestry, the Watchers were chattering with them, Azazel hearing it all, hearing them tell their wives of every secret of Heaven with casual ease: "This is the best way to cut roots—", "While we walk, let me tell you about the clouds since you've never touched them—", "You can't speak to the plants? Let me show you how—" All this beneath a graying, swirling afternoon sky.

Azazel, though, paid little mind, moving toward the log where Armoni was already seated by the shadow of a crackling bonfire.

Naturally, he'd been tempted to inform Samyaza that the demons lurked within every slope of rock before deciding to hesitate; when Samyaza had asked where Azazel had been all those days that he was absent, Azazel had felt a sudden rush of shame and fear, and he had murmured that he was lost. He *had* been lost, after all — in the corridors, in the confusion of seeing old friends, now horned and clawed. But what was he so afraid of? It was difficult to say. As he settled down onto the tree, he breathed out slowly, then found his brow furrowed.

When Samyaza called their attention, the last few Watchers were

settling in and immediately closed their mouths, ending the stream of forbidden, angelic knowledge into the women's ears. "Watchers—" Already, his voice was strained. "We've done enough keeping silent. That day that us angels in Enoch's settlement fled this area, it was because of an attack by the archangel Michael." He stepped toward the bonfire, nodding his head at Danel, who was crouched on the ground beside his sitting wife; he wore a new headscarf, embroidered in a uniquely messy, human way. "But I've heard now that Michael attacked several tribes and slaughtered their people and cattle alike."

Baraquel, sat between his wife and Kokabiel, swallowed thickly, but he called out, "While I was away, Michael attacked my people too." He had brought many of the angels under his jurisdiction, and they were scattered behind him, and one reached to squeeze his shoulder; he'd told them he had been far away with his wife, flying with her. Being romantic with her. He didn't dare look at her now or at Kokabiel. "Forgive me, Samyaza, for not stating it earlier."

Samyaza nodded at that, then replied, "Nearly every tribe then, though not Armoni's."

Immediately, Danel asked, "Is it because Armoni's a sinner?"

"Well," Armoni said, a touch of amusement in his tone, "it might be because I'm unmarried." He gestured to his three Watchers, sitting away from him. "Only five out of my nine have found love."

"Then," Samyaza said, quietly, "it appears the Lord finds our love to have been sin, after all. I can't in good conscience ask any of you angels to continue this sin. But let me say that when I suggested marriage, it was because I had been kissed by a woman, and I had learned the plight of women, and I saw that we were the same. That because one woman sinned, all women were damned. And for us — because one angel sinned, even the best angels have lost favor in God's eyes."

Azazel finally turned his gaze to the speaker, then nearly wished he hadn't.

Idith, Samyaza's wife, was seated on a log of her very own, not far from her husband, but in her arms held a bundle of cloth in the unmistakable shape of a child. The chief of the Watchers, slowly, took it from her, bringing the body to his chest as he turned, facing them all, and

Samyaza continued: "This is the daughter of my wife. My own daughter. The chief prince is willing to kill a child!"

"My wife's son is also dead!" shouted a Watcher in the crowd. "I saw Michael's angels roast him!"

"The brother of my wife," said another Watcher, remaining over his seat on a high branch, where he had also sat a solemn older woman. "They skewered him before my very eyes."

Samyaza, still holding his child, repeated himself: "I can't in good conscience ask for you angels to continue in this sin. We came from Heaven to teach good to humans, and I see that we've only brought the wrath of God, that perhaps an angel carries the fury of the Lord wherever he might go. So I extend a choice now to all of you." He clutched the body closer to his chest, and Azazel swallowed as he noted some of the cloth slip, reveal some of the grayed, wrinkling skin of the girl. "Return," Samyaza said, "to Heaven, abandon the love you have found here, and ask forgiveness from God. Or stay and face His wrath."

Azazel noticed the Watchers look amongst themselves, beginning to murmur, to stare at their wives in anxious confusion, then he noted Samyaza returning the body of the girl to his wife, and he was frustrated again. "Return?" he asked himself under his breath. 'What is there to return to?' He gripped the bark, letting it scratch his palm painfully to try and will himself to stand until, slow and uncertain, he began to rise. Clearing his throat, Azazel saw Samyaza turn over to him and stared. "I need to say something." He needed to speak before any frightened Watchers chose to return.

Their leader hesitated but soon nodded solemnly before every pair of judgmental eyes the non-sinners donned. "All of you," he called, "be quiet. Azazel wants to speak."

Then, silence fell once more, some faraway birds filling the gaps, and Azazel breathed, held the air in his belly. He began, "I saw the devil." At this, the angels, and humans, stiffened. "And I saw where all the demons are; and, make no mistake, they live like beasts. If they were ever angels, they're not anymore." He thought of Rosier, missed him. "But I saw them, in their filth and sin, their king still with his pitiful performance playing God. If we stay on Earth, I'm sure that a life like

theirs could become our fate.” He stepped forward some more. “Even still, I’ll stay.”

It was a rough scoff that alerted Azazel to Danel. “I suppose it’s no surprise a sinner like yourself has no problem falling deeper into his own sin.”

“Danel,” Samyaza said, lowly, “you are a sinner now too.”

“I’m no sinner,” Danel bit back. “We don’t know if this is true, Samyaza. You’re so certain that God would get in the way of love, and why are you so certain? God is loving, He’s always said so. We need to call for Gabriel. We need to—”

“*Quiet*,” Samyaza snapped, much harsher, enough for Azazel to startle the same as the angel of the sun now clenching his jaw, his brown cheeks reddening in anger. “Let Azazel speak.”

Danel just about snarled: “It’s no sin to love—”

“It is,” Azazel heard his voice cut in. “It *is* a sin to love.” Once, long ago, he’d run to an angel Lucifer, asked him if it was true that he was friends with the archangel Michael, and beneath the brilliance of Heaven, the most beautiful angel had laughed playfully, turned away his head — cheeks a rosy hue. “God made us to love Him.” He remembered Lucifer always so close to Michael; ‘he kissed your cheeks, devil, slow like he could not stop.’ Lucifer had fallen, and Michael had been the one to cast him down, who had handed him to God. Maybe Michael didn’t love him as dearly, maybe Michael was a coward.

But Azazel did not want to be a coward. “The second we place anyone before our Lord, He damns us. Since the first kisses we shared with the humans we love, He has turned away from us. So, listen to me, brothers.” The word was almost foreign in his mouth, had lost the familial affection he held with other angels. “I’m in love. And I don’t want to return to Heaven.” He looked to Armoni, Danel, then Samyaza. “I was treated awfully there, as were all us forgiven angels. And even you cruel, cruel angels who hurt me — were you happy to do it? Did it make you happy?” He stepped forward, toward Samyaza, partly talking to him, partly talking to anyone who would listen. “I think you all knew, knew as well as I did, that Heaven is rotting. And I told you that I saw how the filthy demons live,” he remembered Rosier’s kindness, “but they are free.”

It was Kokabiel, though Azazel didn't look to him: "But they will all burn, Azazel. They will burn."

Danel added, "And if we join the demons, we'll burn too!"

"No, we can't join the demons' rebellion," agreed Azazel. "When I spoke to the devil, he had no pity for me or for any of you."

Samyaza said, "Then what are you suggesting?"

"I'm only saying," Azazel replied, "that I'll stay here on Earth. For me, there is no Heaven anymore. That place has long forsaken me, and now that you are all sinners — because you *are* sinners, even if you don't want to believe it — then heed my advice: you will not be welcomed back. God will forgive you, but He will not forget, and neither will the other angels forget." At Danel, he looked directly now, and he said, "They will call you *whore*. They will call you *undeserving*. And, one day, they will tell you that you are not welcome in the city anymore, and God will not stop them."

A few seconds of quiet shifting — before Samyaza, too, announced, "I will stay." His wife stood, at his side, and leaned against the angel but stayed upright. Azazel could see that her cheeks were hollowed. "I will not join the demons, and I will not join with the prince who murdered my daughter in cold blood. Here I'll stay." And Idith's stomach was larger, though not significantly.

Another angel agreed: "I'll stay too. I won't turn my back on my wife."

Yet another: "And so will I."

"My wife was abandoned by her man. I won't be like him."

"I love her more than I love God."

In between the pact, there was tiny, sneering laughter — Kokabiel, who Azazel now noticed had not brought his wife — but it was overshadowed by all the Watchers taking the hands of their partners or standing in solidarity with friends. Azazel looked back to where he'd been sitting and saw Armoni with his lips pressed fine, and he thought to return to him and say that he was unsure of things no matter how firm he'd managed to sound; 'Lord, I don't want to abandon Dina.' Samyaza was continuing with a booming voice behind: "There are some not here with us, but spread the word to them, and give them the same choice. Tell all the Watchers what we've discussed today."

Azazel took the chance to return to his friend, moving toward Armoni but not settling down to sit with him. “And you?” he asked softly, touching his shoulder. “Will you stay?”

“I don’t want to marry,” Armoni replied softly, not looking at him. “But there is no place for me in Heaven, though I don’t belong here either.” He placed his fingers over Azazel’s hand, then slowly stood. “You told me that the demons live comfortably. You said it again, just now.”

Azazel, indeed, had told Armoni everything, but he’d grumbled it spitefully on the way to Elder Adam’s city, saying that the demons had robbed all the luxury and leisure of Heaven to bring to their dingy underworld. Armoni had said nothing then, but now one end of his lips twitched. “I did say that.” ‘You don’t belong among them, Armoni. They’ll rip you to pieces.’ “Why do you bring it up?”

“You don’t think it would be a better idea to join them?”

“They aren’t our friends,” Azazel replied, furrowing his brows, hearing a crackle in the air, somewhere distant, and then a raindrop, falling, cool onto the skin of his forehead. He glanced at the sky, saw the graying hints of downpour, then turned his attention back to his friend. “We’re angels, Armoni, and the demons are beasts.”

“Sinner angels,” Armoni corrected, not raising his head as droplets began to trickle, beading his golden hair, creating pearls on him. “And what separates us, really, from the demons?”

“Have you forgotten how they attacked the village?”

“That was your village,” Armoni said, finally standing, tilting his head. “My city has remained perfectly safe.” Azazel raised a brow. “And Michael and his angels did worse. Between demons and angels, I see no difference except that, in your own words, one of them is free and the other is not.”

“Watchers!” Samyaza called. “Let’s return now and escape the rain.”

Azazel grazed his teeth on his bottom lip; he insisted, hushed, “We’re not demons, Armoni.” He took his friend’s hand to try and pull him along a few steps. “Trust me. We don’t belong there.” But Armoni wrenched his arm away, suddenly walking faster, stepping in between

two trees, and disappearing almost instantly into the sea of foliage. "Armoni—" Azazel called uselessly, more to himself than to his friend, his heart sinking to the same ground that was drinking the downpour.

"What's wrong with him?" Samyaza stepped up to Azazel's side, just as the latter was removing the shawl Eitan's grandmother had given him, lifting it to cover his head. At the leader of the Watchers' side, Idith was draped in Samyaza's robe, the mother shielding her daughter perhaps more than herself.

"It doesn't matter," Azazel murmured. "We should leave, as you said."

"Will Armoni stay on Earth?"

"It seems so."

"That's good." Samyaza nodded, looked to his wife, then back to Azazel. "But walk with me, I want to speak to you." Azazel nearly jerked away when Samyaza took him, gently, by the arm and began tugging him along, pulling him close to his side. "I suppose I need to thank you for speaking. What you said helped me feel more confident in my decision." "Everything is wrong. Armoni is upset with me, and you're being nice to me, Samyaza." "Thank you."

Azazel glanced at Samyaza's wife nervously, then back to his old housemate, and he said, "I was only being honest."

"It's never easy," Idith said, softly, turning over and smiling sadly, "to be honest." One hand was on her back as she struggled to carry her child, but when Samyaza offered, she shook her head ardently, moving toward a tree, then resting against it, breathing hollow for a moment, her eyes clenching shut. "I can do it, honey," she wheezed in a sad laugh. "I promise that I can." And yet, she pressed her forehead against the bark, and the rain continued, falling onto the robe that now looked too flimsy to fully cover her and the dead body.

Samyaza's breath was by Azazel's ear suddenly; though they were some footsteps away from Idith now, he whispered, "I'm worried for her." Azazel nodded in response, and he glanced at her belly again. "I think it's the grief." Samyaza had met with some pregnant women in the past; Azazel had seen them, as well. "It's the grief, isn't it?"

"Yes," Azazel replied. "Let it be the grief, let it be no other thing."

Let it be grief eating her body from the inside out and making her frail. Lord, let it be grief.'

Soon, Azazel had broken away from Samyaza and his wife, making his way toward the city of Adam on his own — a few hours trip on wings, unlike the days-log pilgrimage of Enoch's people all that time ago. Once he'd escaped the loom of rain clouds, he also found the flight to be easier on him, sighing happily, though feeling worry disfigure his face. 'Everything is wrong, everything is backward.' It was like he was staring into a mirror of his life now. An angel on Earth, in love with a man, with a friend who is angry at him, and an enemy who was just kind to him.

He flew over the city, staring at the stone streets, the humans passing by, the children, the animals — not many because it was proper nighttime now, but still ultimately alive. Some goats lifted their head, stared at him with their thin pupils. From a certain home, he heard laughter, and from the largest house, where the elusive Elder Adam was, he saw fires by his doorway. He hadn't met him yet, had missed the chance to, though Samyaza mentioned that he was half-dead, and it was really his grandchildren in charge of the city. Soon, Azazel had flown over all the stone buildings and arrived at the mud, wood, straw huts on the outskirts that Enoch's people had constructed.

Slow, he came to a halt, his feet brushing the dirt until he was walking, pulling his wings back into his body, and frowning as he turned his head all around. It wasn't difficult to find his man, his husband, outside already and fiddling with one of his spears, dressed in no more than cloth wrapped around his waist, falling to his knees. He had been sharpening the same spears at dawn, before Azazel had left for Mount Hermon, and here he was filing his weapons again — attempting to look busy perhaps, to look uncaring. But Eitan raised his chin when Azazel's footsteps grew louder, and a lovely smile conquered his face as he let the spear slip and fall to the grass.

"Yes, I'm home." Azazel grinned as his husband took him into his arms, pulling him to his level. "Did you miss me? I was gone only a couple hours."

"It was all day," laughed Eitan, cupping the angel's face, then kissing him on the lips, fast, then he did it again.

Azazel continued smiling, though flicking his gaze at the hut, hearing the clamor inside it of multiple people — Eitan's grandmother, and Naamah, and two others who shared the home. He brought a hand to Eitan's, tapping his knuckles idly. "Let's go on a walk." He wasn't keen to meet with Eitan's family again and share a tiny bed with his husband and one of his husband's youngest cousins.

At this same time, Armoni was folding some cleaned woven cloths to settle them atop the bedside table. He was hasty with it, wanting to go to the adjacent room where he slept — luxurious by human standards, adequate by an angel's. But the groaning of Adam made him sigh, and he realized he must've woken the elder up with all the tidying. "Armoni," croaked the old man. "You're back."

Armoni swallowed, patting the cloths, not looking at Adam. "I am." He faced the window, saw the pots of plants on it, sitting silent. 'You're all so much less talkative,' he thought, 'on this Earth.'

"What did you angels talk about?"

"Nothing important." He turned around and eyed the rag-like composition of Adam's body. "Do you need something? Did you defecate? I can clean you before I go and sleep."

Elder Adam hesitated, then he said, "You're very kind, angel."

Armoni didn't respond to that, instead moving toward the doorway, where a candle was perched, and he soon leaned toward it, blew until the flame wavered, then fell, fell to sleep. "Rest nicely, Adam." He stepped out into the corridor, sighing greatly. There were torches, all along a wall, showing the murals of monsters; delicate, Armoni touched them, the paint chipping away on his fingers. Azazel had told him that the demons fill their walls with paintings of beasts — perhaps just like this.

"Angel," called a voice, and Armoni turned his head, dropped his arm, and saw a group of men, with Miriam among them. She was as nervous as ever, fiddling with her hands, parting her mouth to speak, but it was one of her brothers who spoke again. "Come with us, Armoni." The young woman was dressed in white.

Quietly, Armoni said — "What is this?"

"All the other angels have married women, but you haven't. We've

prepared you two a wedding already, but we won't announce it to the city for some days."

"No." But they began approaching him, and Armoni staggered back. "I won't."

"You must."

"I said that I won't."

"You will." They took Armoni's arms and began dragging him, and he kicked his feet against the ground, struggling, forcing out his wings just for a man to jab a dagger into his inner feathers. Hissing sharply with pain, feeling his hot blood suddenly spill. But they told Armoni that it would do them well for the only virgin great-great-granddaughter of Adam to marry an angel. He shouldn't struggle. He was the man, they told him, of the union; he would be fine. And they said keep still, or we will tell the other Watchers that you've lost your mind. We know they don't like you.

Armoni was trembling now, his stomach so clenched he thought it would start to rip inside, but he said nothing as they began guiding him toward another room. And he said nothing for the rest of the night.

Whereas Eitan and Azazel had found a forested area, and Azazel had set himself up against a tree and let his man kiss him, then smiled against his mouth. Soon, he had turned over, arched his back, and Eitan had put his mouth on him first, loosened him with his tongue, then with his fingers. His cock followed, but Azazel took it happily, quite acquainted with every detail of its curve. Though they were alone, they kept quiet, fearing a lone hunter might catch them in this act against God. Stifling delighted laughter, Azazel felt his human work to fondle him, to ensure they would finish together like they were one person, one finish. A shudder eventually came, and when the man groaned by Azazel's ear, they fell to weakness in unison.

Falling — onto the grass together, only to be watched by the stars peeking through the branches above. "I love you," Azazel said simply, thinking of earlier. "I'm happy to be married to you."

"And I love you, my angel," Eitan snickered, reaching for his hand. "But aren't you afraid? I'll age, and I'll die. They'll bury me."

"When they bury you," the angel replied, "I'll lay in the grave with you, and I'll watch how long it takes for the Earth to take you back."

And once there's only bones left, I'll leave; I'll go looking for where the Earth has scattered the rest of you. I think I'd find your hands in the trees." His finger drew crescents on the other's open palm, soft skin on tough skin. "I'd find your mouth on the flowers of a meadow, your breath in the breeze that chases the dandelions. But I don't think I'd ever find your heart. I think the jealous Earth would steal it for itself."

Eitan laughed. "Do all angels talk like this?"

"I think so. We're full of love," Azazel replied, then kissed him again. "We're all angels of love."

CHAPTER 23



Bound and gagged with fine red silk — a human was placed between the devil and the archangel, atop a limestone table set for the torture.

Michael had said nothing as the man was tied to the ends of the altar, even if he was now on the stage of the theater, not far from the throne of the demon king. His silence persisted even as Satan outstretched an open palm for Baal to hand him a dagger with a hilt of gold. It was studded in gems the same red as Satan's robe, and he fingered the precious stones with a certain deliberate teasing before Satan tightened his grip, lifted, then brought the weapon down onto the man. He wore quite little, only a cloth wrapped at his pelvis, when the dagger dug into his clavicle, the feeble flesh God had doomed him with offering little resistance. A scream broke through the silk between his teeth — high and guttural — and his body revolted, lurching forward by instinct, only to burrow the knife deeper. But Satan looked not at the man but at the angel, who looked back at him.

Slow, he dragged the dagger down his chest, reaching stomach, the skin coming apart like petals unfurling to reveal their yellow centers but in the case of a man — red-pink blood and tissue. The shrieks became wet, gurgles on the red sea filling his mouth enough to spill through the gag. The limbs seizing now against the constraints holding

him captive to the stone, but the useless flails trembled quicker, quicker, until they jerked and froze. Finally, he slumped. Head lolling back, tears at the crevices of bulging, circled eyes, spilling upward to catch on his pale brows. From the edges of the altar, red began to dribble, leaking out from the open body — stilling its shivering at last. Yet — his heart continued to beat.

Thump, thump, it said.

A dozen demons had come, split so that each side of Satan's throne housed six — all of them dukes — and behind Michael, there was a similar arrangement of six armored angels, though many had turned away from the sight of a dying man, as if they were not also killers — the daggers of God. Michael, however, didn't once look away from the devil, his eyes only visible in glimmers — when the light of torches struck the narrow slits on his golden helmet just right. A hint of living — the colors of Earth — was in Michael's eyes but betraying no more emotion than his flat mouth and the lingering hands at his sides.

Satan dove a hand beneath the fold of skin, snaked it between the lung tissue still expanding, contracting, expanding, and through the tight strings of nerves, to dig his nails into the veins that held the heart in a desperate cling. But he had no trouble taking it — the thumping muscle, where the humans had their weak souls trapped — and tugged it out, tugged it free with a squelch that must've been its final cry. Like the body it had moved once, it trembled and spilled, now onto the devil's pretty, splendid fingers.

At last, the prince of Heaven spoke: "Devil."

The heart tore right at Satan's lips, the spill of red falling from his paradisaal mouth to his chin, to his slender neck, to an exposed collarbone and gilded pendants. Perfect bronze skin taking the blood like canvas meeting paint, whereas his drapery stained. But — another bite, teeth sinking in, and he persisted once more, never drifting his sight away from Michael. His tongue teased the strings within the heart, slipping between and lapping at the wet. Suckling, drawing out the hints of soul — surely, soul was that sharp, silver taste between the irrefutably raw chew — until he began to inch his hand away from his own mouth, dreadfully slow. He swiped his tongue, then, on his

bottom lip, as if that would be enough to save it from the crimson downpour.

“Chief prince,” said Satan, “angel of God, angel of strength.” Taking a few steps back, the king of the demons fell onto his throne, set both legs over one of the armrests, crossing them. Another squelch as he took, once more, a bite of the heart. “Archangel, above all other archangels. The angel who God loves most dearly— Oh, but I suppose not. You were never His favorite, were you?” A droplet of ruby-red dribbled a line down from wrist to elbow, one Lucifer soon traced with his tongue, leaving skin pristine in its wake. “I’ve never been sure if the Lord even liked you.” He leaned back sluggishly, readjusted himself, the awry grin tugging at his lips twisting until it fell into a frown, until his vision must’ve hazed from the narrowing of his eyes — all the amusement, perishing slow. “It’s been very long since we last spoke.”

Baal couldn’t stop his mouth, gripping the iron mace in his hand tighter as he shouted, “Why have you come here, shit of God?!” He tensed his shoulders. “We have you outnumbered here in our caves. You and all your coward, virgin angels will be devoured like this man here if you attack us now!”

From one of Michael’s sides, a ring-wearing angel, helmeted just like his prince, attempted to step forward, but Michael raised an armored hand, keeping him still.

“I heard,” Satan went on, looking back at the heart he chipped at with his nail, “that you razed a village. A few of them.” From pursed lips, he hummed, then lifted the organ and took final, fine bites, chewing with a certain angelic elegance, swallowing. “You killed hundreds of innocents — men, women, children. They told me that you were like a beast.”

“You,” said Michael, “are the beast.”

Lucifer once again licked the blood on his hand, his wrist, his fingers, each one sliding into his wet mouth, one by one, until he let out a long, sweet sigh. “I wasn’t sure I’d ever see you again.” He shifted once again, brought his feet to the ground before his throne, folded his hands over his lap, and all the teasing was truly absent now but replaced by nothing easily discernible. “Remove your helmet and face

me.” Michael didn’t move. “You and all your angels — is this how you face God?”

“You,” said Michael once again, “are not God.”

Once more, Baal stepped forward, feeling other demons follow with him again, and now many of them held their weapons tight, muscles tensed. Asmodeus was nearby, brushing his cane on Baal’s leg in what must’ve been a silent warning. But the angels mirrored them, all those except for the prince, who remained entirely still, a statue of himself, except for the visible clench of his teeth, the subtle rise and fall of his chest.

At him, Satan spoke once more: “In the house of the devil, the devil is your God.” He raised his chin, and he outstretched a hand as if to offer a gift but he held nothing. “Look at me with respect, you rotten scum of an angel, or return to your Father.”

The prince was motionless, not unlike the others in the room, even those leopards by Satan’s feet, who had smothered the stirring of their tails. Michael appeared to look at them as he tilted his head forward then lifted his hands, brought them to his head. He gripped his helmet, removed it slow, and as he did — the angels with him followed. In fact, the other angels were quicker, revealing their quite perfect faces of occasional sharpness and gentler curves, whether on their cheeks or noses. Some may have been familiar to Baal, or to Asmodeus, for that matter, but before either had the chance to look, the archangel finally removed his helmet in full. He held it delicate in a gauntlet, before his chest, and lifted his chin to reveal his face.

Michael was still an angel — his hooded eyes the reflection of the Earth, his mouth beautiful in its plump shape while stray curls of his hair, nearly black but clinging to brownness still, framed his face and cascaded onto his back. His skin was still warm brown, and his nose still carried that hill on its bridge, and his body was still large, hefty with strength. In most ways, he hadn’t changed, and Baal found himself half in the past, standing in Heaven, fluttering his wings, seeing the prince at the other end of the room with the most beautiful angel in paradise, hand at his waist.

Though he wasn’t sure if that was a memory or a legend, a founding myth he’d pieced together himself for where he now stood.

Baal turned, looked at his beloved Satan, who was lowering his hand, and Asmodeus at his other side. ‘We were really in Heaven once,’ Baal thought, ‘all of us.’ Until Michael had set them on the path toward death. Death was God’s plan for them. They knew it, well enough.

Michael spoke: “I come with a message from God.”

“Oh, I thought you were here because you missed me.”

Laughter, rolling out of the demons’ mouths and even from the angels standing behind the chief, though much quieter and ashamed. They lowered their heads to hide the amusement squirming on their lips and eyes, looking away from Michael, whose expression hadn’t changed. He remained stone, dry disdain in every word that left his mouth: “You’ve seen that angels have been living on Earth for months. One came to you and asked for your help.”

“Azazel,” Satan replied. “According to himself, he was running from you.”

“The Watchers, that’s what they call themselves.” Michael stepped forward, tilted his head some. “And their leader is Samyaza, one of the angels of healing. They came to Earth, promising to teach goodness to humans and return them to God. Instead, they’ve defiled themselves with the women.”

“Why do you talk to the devil of defilement?” Satan said. “Why are you here? You think I haven’t discovered this all for myself?”

Michael replied, “I’m here to ask if you’re the one responsible for their sin.”

At this, the devil laughed. “Me? You think I’ve taught the Watchers lust?”

“You are,” said Michael, “the father of sin. And you were the first to commit such filth as fornication.”

“Does it bother you—” a grin on Satan’s face as another giggle escaped and rattled his shoulders “—that I haven’t surrendered to God and His plans?”

Calculating, Baal looked to his king just as some of those angels at Michael’s sides called out, “So it’s true!” and “Beast!” and then, “You won’t be satisfied until all the angels have been damned with you!” He scratched at the hilt of his weapon, now finding himself biting his tongue and waiting for Satan to say the word to surge forward and

attack the angels as they had at the battle for Heaven. ‘I haven’t forgotten,’ Baal thought slowly, ‘the last time I saw you, Michael, what you did.’

Satan persisted: “Does it kill you, Michael, to see angels just like you fall into the temptation of flesh?” His own eyes had narrowed, and the end of his lip twitched — all of his face trickling with anger now. “And how easy it is. If God hated sin so much, if God really loved you angels, then surely, He wouldn’t make it so easy to turn away from Him. Surely not.” Michael took yet another step forward. “And what will you do now? Will you try to kill me?”

Baal, for the third time, could hardly contain himself, rage almost trembling him. He saw it in his mind’s eye — Michael’s throat in his hands, the prince’s mouth filling with redness, those cruel eyes widening in terror, while his claws pierced into his flesh until it tore and spilled blood like seed from fruit. Instantly, Baal dug his fangs into the scars inside his cheeks, not tearing through but poking uncomfortably. ‘Focus,’ he urged himself; he shouldn’t rouse himself with fantasies.

“Well?” Lucifer stood, slow, putting both hands on his back, holding them. “Will you destroy me and my house and my demons for what we’ve done to the Watcher angels? For how we’ve tarnished God’s creation?”

“You lie,” Michael said. “You attacked Enoch’s people too. And I know you’re no friend of the Watchers.” He nodded his head some, a glint of amusement in his eyes. “I only asked to see if you could be trusted.”

“You asked because you missed my lies, beloved.”

Baal stiffened, and so did Michael, the hint of glee disappearing from both his gaze and his lips.

“But I’ll tell you the truth now.” Lucifer stepped forward, nodding at the carcass before them, opened scandalously, its ribs open, exposing the sad void between lungs. “This man here came last spring. The humans have stories of me, of a devil who will grant any wish in exchange for a soul. They say the devil craves a soul, since he is only empty flesh now since the fall, and he craves the love of God. And so men, and it’s almost always men, come looking for me, and I invite

them in here, meet them like you. But I don't often let them see me; I wear a mask of red, I wear the skin of all the animals on Earth. And they tell me their greed."

Baal remembered it: the human man on his knees, begging for the devil to help him win the heart of his niece.

"They ask for my blessing to provide them fortune, power, and fucking." Satan stared down at the prince. "You wouldn't believe, angel, the dreams the humans have, their desires." His tone fell into a purr as he stepped to the side, trailed around the altar, and approached Michael. "Oh, they do sometimes ask for no more than water or food. Other times, all they want is a little luck to win a bet or for the coming harvest to be bountiful because they know the Earth and I are so close. And I grant their wishes when I so please. But they will often come asking to fuck their mothers, to kill their children, to fulfill the fantasy they have of a horse cock in their mouth, or to eat the shit of a bull. They tell me they want all the power of God, to have everyone at their feet who has ever wronged them."

Baal held his breath as the devil strolled around Michael, humming delightfully, though the archangel continued staring forward, at the throne, as if Satan still sat there.

Lucifer said, "How the humans disgust me. Them and their wants. Them and their stupidity. I tell them that I'll eat their soul, and they never seem to think that I'd eat their flesh too. All they care for is fucking, killing, taking, hurting." He continued to circle him, hands still at his back. "And yet they have these desires with no influence from me. You see, wickedness is something so natural in humans that, if it comes from the devil, then it comes from the part of the devil that is God." Slowing, leaning close to Michael's ear, he said, "There is some of God in me, after all."

Like a growl, a noise of low fury tore from Michael's throat as he jerked in Satan's direction, as if he were going to launch himself at him, but the rattle of his chains struck the air loudly; and all of the devil's demons, all of the prince's angels, twitched where they were, as all the animals in the throne room did. "The humans know wickedness," Michael seethed, "*because of you*. Every one of their sinful desires, their acts against God, are because of what you have done."

“Everything I have done is because of what God has done,” Lucifer replied calmly, stopping before Michael, standing there, breathing. “For the evil of humans, I am just a scapegoat. And for God, I am the same.” A smile now, strikingly sweet. “His sacrificial lamb.” Now, the king of the demons tilted his head. “Is that why you’ve come, Michael? Does your Father look for someone to blame for the evil He’ll commit?”

Michael said nothing, and Satan stared, his eyes thinned but still carrying the brightness of stars, cradled by long lashes, his hair loose and fallen in its eternal gold. His plump lips were losing their smile and parting. Red, draped, thick — the robes on him were hefty enough to obscure his body, though the excess of jewelry was still strung all over him — a golden belt clasped to accentuate his waist, medallions stacked over his chest, earrings dangling down in an intermingle of ruby and gold. It wasn’t a surprise that the humans begged for the wealth of the devil; he appeared to drip it from every corner of his beauty, from the ends of his bare feet to the tips of the horns protruding from his crown.

‘Devil,’ Michael thought, anger like an illness turning his blood feverish and his muscles laden with aches. ‘God forsaken devil.’ But he was shaking. ‘I need to hurt you. I need to taste your suffering.’

Voice dropping so low it was nearly a murmur, Satan said, “Samyaza’s wife is with child.”

“She is not the only one,” replied Michael.

Lucifer made a noise of amusement. “Whatever will you do about this? I assume the attacks on the villages were a warning, but I don’t see the Watchers running to your God for forgiveness.”

“You won’t help them.”

“Why shouldn’t I?”

“What the angels and humans have done is an abomination.”

“I suppose love is an abomination to God.”

“This is no love,” Michael snapped, taking a step back now, moving away as if he were trying to escape the clutches of Satan, who wasn’t touching him. “And when we punish the Watchers, you won’t interfere.”

“Is this really what you came here for? To tell me to sit still and look pretty as you go to butcher those angels in your war?”

"This is no war." Michael raised his helmet and settled it over his head once more. "And what I was sent to do was to come into the filth in which you demons live and war to warn you all to not involve yourselves." He gestured, and his angels followed his lead, lowering their helmets back onto their proper places.

"Do us demons look to be warring to you?" Lucifer dragged his feet as he stepped away. "We live very comfortably. We love and we fuck and we eat and we celebrate each season with festivals of our own. We live in happiness the likes of which you've never known." He chuckled, placing both hands on the altar behind him, hands dipping into the blood, teasing the open skin of the body.

"Farewell, devil." The brown of Michael's feathers peered from over his shoulders just as he turned, stalking toward the door with his followers behind him.

"You don't know the Earth," Satan called after him. "If you want to destroy the Watchers, you need the help of the land at their feet. You're not prepared to lead a war."

"If I ever return here, it'll be to kill you again."

Baal moved before he could stop himself, stepping to Satan's side and swallowing what felt to be crystals down his throat, slicing him open inside, rupturing him.

"Farewell, angel," the devil said.

The prince of Heaven left him, and he returned to chaos brewing in paradise, to forgiven sinners on the streets burned and disavowed. 'What the devil has done. All this wickedness because of him.' He returned to his Lord; he heeded to Him like a dog. 'Because of me.'

CHAPTER 24



Samyaza stared at his wife, lying in the bed with her, staring at her, blinking occasionally, but often just staring. They had to speak of it, and they would soon, he was sure — his lips were parted already — and yet he found himself caught on the curve of her large nose, the wrinkles by her closed eyes, the curls of hair that tousled down to cloud by her throat and sprawl over her breasts. ‘They’re larger,’ he thought. ‘The same as her stomach.’ Gingerly, he reached, grasped her hand, which was still her hand despite all these other transformations, but he supposed that Idith was still Idith — regardless of the swelling. It reminded him of injury; once, he had watched as Raphael showed him the broken ankle of an angel, all the skin around the joint bloated, like something was beneath it, alive and trying to break free.

But pregnancy was not an injury but its opposite. It was life, not death — ‘though it can kill.’ It was like injury, then. Except beautiful, at least Samyaza supposed so. ‘It’s beautiful,’ Raphael had said, showing the younger angel the skin that had split open and revealed the meat of the ankle within. That day, Samyaza had struggled to find anything beautiful about the gore. And he was struggling again.

‘I’m sorry.’ Samyaza leaned in and kissed his wife’s forehead, then slipped away, off the bed, hearing the wood beneath the mat creak. ‘I’m

sorry.’ He stopped just before running into one of the hammocks where the three other children of his wife slept. His children, too, he supposed. The youngest two, a girl and her tiny brother were cuddled together in one hammock, which he saw as he walked past, lifting a hand to brush the curls by their forehead, then leaning down to press a kiss to their head each, the quiet smack of his lips reverberating in his ears. Then, he was feeling his feet move beneath him, sandals on the dirt, crunching beneath.

Outside, he met the sun, the sky still lingering with the pinks and yellows of dawn but blue enough to be sure that a new day had come. Samyaza stared at it, like he had his wife. ‘It’s beautiful.’ Oddly, he found it a nicer sight than the golden sphere above the city of Heaven that was never-changing, always constant in its glow and hue. Change was nice, was pretty. Change was so antithetical to angels, to their world and to their bodies. But humans changed — their world and their bodies. Samyaza listened to steps behind him, turned, then smiled at his child — the new oldest daughter, who he pulled close and delighted in the tenderness of the girl’s snicker. She would grow old. She would grow taller. Samyaza kissed her hair and smiled against it. ‘Beautiful,’ he thought. And so he didn’t speak about the pregnancy with Idith, not for a while; he looked to the sky instead, waiting to see if Michael would return.

It was further noticeable within two months, and some humans congratulated her, congratulated Samyaza with their eyes frightened and hands wringing.

Idith occasionally vomited, but she did it away from Samyaza, on her own. She would ask him for water afterward, and he would give it to her. She asked for odd foods, like the intestine of a goat, and he would retrieve it without question. On the night they finally burned the carcass of Idith’s eldest daughter, over some twigs and winter flowers, he’d asked Idith’s mother about her behavior, and the older woman said this was normal, and it could be grief eating away at her also. Samyaza trusted this, then went on with life.

He continued not to mention the pregnancy, though he held her tight whenever they slept. He kissed her soft, and he asked why her people chose to live on the outskirts of Elder Adam’s city, rather than

within it. She said they were too different of a people, and Samyaza didn't pursue the topic.

"Tell me," she said, her voice weak, "about the stars again." And he did. "And about the water. About enchanting the water." When she would share the knowledge with her mother, her friends, her daughters, Samyaza didn't mind.

It was best not to discuss it. It was best not to think about it. He saw children running in the city, and he imagined one with angel wings, with the odd, shining eyes of divinity, the symmetrical face, the clean teeth, and he soothed himself like this. 'A child angel.' It was such a sweet thought, after all. 'Maybe I'm happy about this. I think Idith is too. We're going to have a child. An angel that will age and grow.' He did want this. He did.

But Kokabiel appeared one day — his voice cooing from above while Samyaza had been gathering some thick robes gifted by Cain's people in the city square; he needed them for the winter chills that had finally settled upon them. The chief of the Watchers lifted his chin, turned, and he saw the grinning angel of stars perched on a branch of a tree, absent of leaves, having rot to a skeleton of itself.

"Kokabiel?" Samyaza looked around himself, then back at the other Watcher. "What are you doing here?"

"Brother, my wife is pregnant." Kokabiel laughed a little. "So is Baraquel's and many other women."

Grimacing, Samyaza mused, "You have no shame at all."

"Have you spoken to Gabriel?" Kokabiel tilted his head down at him, eyes wide and unblinking. "I tried. I called up for him, but he didn't answer me. And the stars — the stars tell me that Heaven has fallen into chaos! Chaos! All the forgiven sinners have been thrown out of their homes, and now the archangels are scrambling to settle their fighting."

Samyaza furrowed his brow. "That can't be true."

"The stars don't lie, Samyaza." Kokabiel cackled, swinging his legs and landing in a crouch before he stood, sharply, before his leader. "But ah, well, I think you'll see the truth in time... You all will. The Lord is not happy, but it's not angels like you and me that He is so concerned with; His plans are larger, larger than us or even the stars can

see.” He stepped, brought his face far too close to Samyaza’s own. “What He does with us will be even worse than what He did to the demons.”

Samyaza shook his head, inching back with the bundle of drapery still in his arms. “Kokabiel, are you certain the stars are talking to you, and it’s not your own fantasies that you’re reciting?” He scoffed, turning on his heel. “You should return to your people.”

“I will, Samyaza, I will, but I have a question for you.”

Having grown impatient — “What more could you want?”

“Do you think an angel could ever be pregnant?”

Samyaza stopped, blinked, then laughed. “What?” He laughed some more. “Of course not.” Kokabel was looking at him gravely. “Where did this come from?”

“Curiosity.” Kokabel’s ruby wings crept out from his back, and he moved a few more steps away. “If we could have a child with a woman, then why not with another angel?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Samyaza laughed a third time, forced now, shaking his head. “Us angels we weren’t— God didn’t plan for—”

“We’ve abandoned God’s plan, haven’t we?” With a beat of his wings, Kokabel rose to the sky, saying, “I’ll try to contact Uriel, but he’s never liked me, you know. Maybe you should try praying to Raphael.” With a laugh, he swooped higher and left, following the winter breeze, not in the direction Samyaza knew Kokabiel’s people were in, but for once, he was relieved. ‘I hope you’re going to Baraqiel so that he can calm you.’

But he didn’t see either of those angels again, and he didn’t seek them out — for another month.

“Mm, husband.”

Samyaza blinked right after he’d stepped into the hut, then turned his head to see his wife, but she wasn’t in bed like she often was these days. Instead, she was standing by it, wrapped in a blanket. “Husband?” The angel shifted from one foot to the other. “You’ve never called me that before.”

She approached, waddled, and Samyaza wondered if she felt as heavy as she looked. Then, Idith turned up her face, tugged him down, and kissed his jaw. “It’s new for me too. I never called my old man my

husband." She smiled against him, and Samyaza smiled too, then leaned down to press his lips to hers in a peck.

"You called him by his name?"

"I called him bastard most of the time." She laughed, wonderfully.

Samyaza's chest felt warm, happy. Delicate, he pulled her close to his side, turning back and facing the city. "How are you feeling?"

"I vomited," she chuckled. "But walking helps. I suppose the city is beautiful. My father told me the people of Cain are vermin." Before Samyaza could reply, she said, "I don't see how they're any more vermin than we are. We were damned before Cain. And we're damned after him." She shrugged her shoulders in a sluggish, casual manner. "We died before him and we've died after him."

Samyaza frowned. "Don't bring up death."

"Oh, I have a handsome angel at my side. I'll never die, I'm sure." She took his arm and began tugging him along. "Come. Walk with me. Oh, and my sister will be staying with us. She said she injured her ankle." Samyaza instantly replied that he could help. "Good angel." She kissed his cheek, putting her hand on her belly, and, without thinking, Samyaza put his hand there too.

Thump, thump. The skin rose against him, like a chest with a lively heart might.

"Kicks," she explained. "My mother says it'll be a girl."

Samyaza felt something stutter in his chest; it may have been his own heart, but he wasn't sure. "Kicks?" All he knew was that he'd begun to smile, though timorously. "I see." Again, Idith was laughing, then tugging him further out into the cool air with infectious joy. "Kicks from the girl?"

"Come," Idith said. "We should get some food, then return. The girl is hungry, and so is the mother."

"When we return, I'll cook for you."

"Cook for me then, angel." She hugged his arm and leaned her head on his shoulder. His heart light, Samyaza kissed her hair, chuckling a bit to himself — so giddy it was a bit worrying, startling. 'Lord, it can't be true that you're against this much happiness. It can't be. God wouldn't deny love, would He?' But Samyaza paused at this thought, and his mind, slowly, drifted to the angel of body painting, the one

who'd lived in the same house as him in Heaven, the one he always chided.

Some days later — Samyaza finally spoke with Azazel again, though he first saw him from afar as he stepped out from Elder Adam's home. He'd just brought up a hand to lay against a rough stone pillar, intending to watch whatever giant birds he might catch in the distance for a while but intending to return soon to his wife. Then, he caught the angel of body painting, walking with a reed-woven basket of things, and Samyaza soon felt his feet moving on their own, his thoughts saying, 'Azazel, Azazel.' He swerved between passing humans, murmuring to be excused before he called out a name. 'I haven't seen you in so long.' "Azazel!" "How are you?" "Come here!" 'Are you okay?'

Azazel turned his head, stopping where he was — arms occupied by the basket, eyes occupied with a curious narrow. "Why?" At his waist, a leather band carried a simple, sheathed dagger; Samyaza figured it was the one he'd given to him, long ago now, within the first weeks of their arrival to Earth.

"Well—" Samyaza said, then realized he didn't have the answer to that. Why had he called Azazel? "Where are you going?" He supposed he was curious about that.

The angel stared at him, lips parting slight. "To my husband." At this, he began to walk, but Samyaza followed, straying by his side. "You know him, don't you? He was with Armoni when you all came after me."

"Eitan." Samyaza had nearly forgotten. "Yes." He breathed out, slow, through his nose. "A man."

"You were the one who introduced us."

"I remember it." He did. 'I regret it.' He always did regret so much when it came to Azazel.

"I haven't told anyone," Azazel said, softer, "about being with a man."

"That's good," Samyaza replied. "The other Watchers wouldn't like knowing you're with a man. Even Armoni has a wife now. I just saw her."

Azazel was frowning, so deep it was making the light blue of his

eyes feel hollower. "Armoni hasn't been speaking to me, but I've seen his wife too. I don't think he's happy."

"She seems to like him," Samyaza said, "so I don't know what his problem could be, but Armoni has always liked being unhappy, hasn't he?"

"You think he's so miserable," Azazel replied, "but he's not. He's sweet. I know that he is. And I think he's quite sensitive too. So I worry for him. I wish he would talk to me and tell me why he married that woman."

Samyaza flickered his eyes over to Azazel, whose voice had begun to tremble, wobble, thinking now that he had upset him. "I'm not sure." Perhaps it was better to change the subject. "But don't make that face, brother. You should try speaking with him soon. Whatever has him upset, I'm sure will pass." Azazel breathed out. "And," Samyaza cleared his throat, "I wanted to tell you." Hesitating, rolling his shoulders. "My wife is pregnant."

The older angel, Azazel, clutched his basket a little tighter, and he thought, 'Why are you saying this to me casually, maybe even happily?' "I noticed."

They were still walking in the direction of the walls, headed toward where Enoch's people had made their new home. "I didn't think it could happen," Samyaza admitted, partly to himself. "We're angels, after all. We're already eternal. We don't have to relegate ourselves to that kind of immortality." He gestured before he could help it, flicking his hand in the direction of young girls attempting to climb the walls of the city with their bare hands and feet only to tumble down the stone with a chorus of laughter. "I'm thankful."

"To whom?" Azazel furrowed his brows at him. "To whom are you thankful? God?"

Immediately, Samyaza's giddiness over his coming child wavered, and his smile fell into a deep, offended frown. "No. Is God the one birthing my child? It's my wife. I'm thankful to my wife."

'What has happened to you, Samyaza?!' Azazel wanted to scream. 'Ever since you married, you've been so thoughtless, so impulsive!' "Do you think there is anything your wife can do that is not through the will of God?"

“I suppose you wouldn’t understand the capabilities of women,” the leader of the Watchers seethed, “since you’ve paired yourself with a weak man—”

Azazel cut in, snarling: “You think God will allow this to happen?! If He was so furious to send Michael down to kill innocent humans, then don’t you think He’ll do something much worse because of this?”

“What do you suggest then, Azazel, since you’re so wise?!” They were beginning to walk faster, though they didn’t notice it, and their voices had raised so high they may as well have brushed the clouds.

“I don’t know—”

“You’re so skilled at committing sin, after all.”

At this, Azazel stopped, twisted around, dropping the heavy basket from his hands, and grabbed Samyaza’s forearm with urgent anger, opening his mouth, but the one who spoke was neither of the angels. Instead, it was the voice of an older woman, breathless, wheezing, turning their heads instantly as the sprinting thuds of her footsteps sounded. She was saying: “Angel, your wife! The child!” A sharp gasp. “N-Now, the child is coming now, but—” She couldn’t speak quick enough; the leader of the Watchers had already sprung out his wings, running, almost launching himself into the sky in the direction of the hut of his family.

It was his family, after all. His Idith, their children, his wife’s mother, and her siblings, her cousins, her friends. They were his family. He’d never had a family, so he couldn’t be sure, but he would wager his soul and his flesh on them — that was family, wasn’t it? There was a racing celestial heart in his chest, there was the crowding around the hut, and there were, as he landed, so soon after he flew, screams. He fell into the sea of humans and a lone Watcher; Samyaza elbowed all those there out of his way, hurrying to the front, near the doorway. He shouted at the angel nearby to order the congregation to scatter. Shuddering, trembling, Samyaza saw the remaining humans in his way scurry to let him pass.

“Samyaza!” Azazel — he had followed, the stuttering voice so close to his back.

Barbed and tapered, the wails were so strained that they tore, from screams into high-pitched wheezing. Her voice — Idith — was broken,

so broken it had died and her mouth was skewed open but nothing was releasing itself from between her lips. Crouched with each knee over large, clay slabs — with older and heavier women on her right and left — Idith held onto those clutching her arms and had her tunic drenched in sweat, as if in water, as if an angel had healed her. Her body tremored like shakes of the ground itself, shook Samyaza like she was the Earth. But she was bleeding out onto legs and the dirt below, in so much red it may as well have been a flood of it, of her. Idith — each cry from her like a pierce on Samyaza — flickering her gaze upward and catching the angel, and for that fleeting second, her face softened. Samyaza thought she might reach out for him, and that maybe she was really only screaming because she didn't want to be alone.

Except another cry tore out from her mouth, and her teeth clenched, grinding on each other. She refused the cloth that any one of the four midwives with her offered, shaking her head, twisting her lips. "Damn you, God!" The blasphemy was sweet in between monstrous pain — the only relief. "Damn you!" Her eyes were aflame, more rage in them than even the devil.

"Damn you," Samyaza echoed, leaning back, his knees knocking together, and soon tumbling into Azazel, who instantly raised his arms and held him, "God." The words so natural on his tongue no matter the goodness he was supposedly made of; the sacrilege so right in his heart when the horror before him was God-made. "You beast of a God. You rotten, violent Creator." A demure of hate now, his wife was crying out to kill God, and Samyaza listened. "Wicked monster—"

A hand reached out of her, and it latched onto the ground and pulled itself out.

Many-eyed, the gaze of the infant fell to spill over the dirt, and many-limbed, it crawled. Its flesh was an afterthought, trailing behind in milk-whiteness and rose-red, delivering by revealing a set of teeth on what was surely its spine to cut itself free from the thread connecting it to the mother. But soon, the jaw moved to its front; as if it were made of interlocking wheels, every part of it kept shifting. Concurrently, the creature throbbed, like it was a lung filling with air, then releasing. When it began to cry, it snapped its jaws forward, nearly nipping Samyaza's ankle and making him jump away.

And the midwives screamed, one of those holding Idith scurrying backward to the furthest end of the hut she could. "Kill it!" she shouted. "Kill that beast!"

It was Azazel that acted, reaching for the silver dagger at his hip, but shoving it into the hands of Samyaza, who took it immediately, but clumsily, tumbling from one of his hands to the other. Unsheathing it without a second thought, raising it high just as the creature grabbed his ankle, his breath held.

Another scream from Idith, but this time she said, "Stop!" And Samyaza entirely froze at that, his own gaze not moving, sight stuck on that monster on the ground. His child. "Samyaza, don't you—" Her voice was hoarse, crackled still by lingering ache. "Don't do it!" But there was something shrill of it, of her. "I'll kill all my other children if you dare!"

Samyaza raised his head, eyes widened, lips parting, and saw her. Wrestling the midwives, trying to free from their hold, she kept shouting at him, but not saying many words, just making cries like an animal. 'I suppose,' Samyaza thought in horror, 'you are just an animal. A human.' He staggered in place once more, but he lowered the dagger.

"Give me my child! Give him to me!"

Distantly, Samyaza heard Azazel call his name, but he allowed the weapon to trickle from his hands onto the dirt. He reached and took the living terror into his arms, and it shivered against him. It was almost in the shape of a child. 'My child.' He held it tighter, and he almost felt bones. 'My sin.' It cried against him, or at least the wetness Samyaza felt over the front of his tunic made him think so. Without thinking, he entirely moved away from Azazel, and he approached his wife, who sighed greatly in relief and extended trembling arms toward him and their abomination of a child.

'It's a horror,' Azazel thought. 'It's a giant.'

CHAPTER 25



“What should I do then? Do you want me to cut it out of her?!” The angel of the sun twisted around, his brow twitching, his teeth almost bared. “Should I kill her, Baraqiel? Would that satisfy you?” Stumbling back, Danel felt one of his saddled feet land on something tough and textured — a rapid glance offered him a conch, almost the length of his foot — but he did no more than scowl again and face the angel of light before him.

Baraqiel was frowning, no different than he often did, but there was a deep crevice of worry on his forehead, right above his eyes squinted beneath the sun. “Danel—” He visibly swallowed, then began again: “Danel, I just came to express my fear. Within the tribe of humans and Watchers I was assigned, there have been four children already, and they’re all frightening to look at. I don’t know what to do. My wife might be pregnant as well. I’m not certain. I don’t want to speak to Samyaza about it.”

“Why not Kokabiel, then, since you like him so dearly?” The tide nearly lapped at Danel and though he didn’t feel it, he could hear the gurgle of foam climbing along the beachside, the screeches of sea birds, the roar of more distant waves, and even the skittering of tiny crabs, lugging along the homes on their backs. It reminded him of his tribe of nomadic humans. They were several hours away from the shore, but

surely laughing, talking, sitting on the ground, and sharing meals and stories. Once, he'd asked his wife if they should kill all the men, but she said she had a father, a brother, and that not all men were wicked. What men have of wickedness comes from God, God's words in the garden — the punishment of Eve.

His wife was likely hidden in her tent of leather now, maybe asleep on the ground. Tired and hungry.

There was a trickle of silence, then the crunch of sand beneath feet as Baraqiel appeared at Danel's side, tucking his pale white wings into his back. Before the both of them, the horizon was a lovely, harmless light blue, and there might have been a mound in the distance, an animal peeking up for air, perhaps a whale, but if it was a whale, it was a quiet one. "I," Baraqiel filled the silence, "was told by Kokabiel to marry her. I think he'll be upset if he finds out I'm hesitating about our child."

"Why do you care what Kokabiel thinks?" Danel huffed. "Aren't you your own angel? And isn't that Kokabiel scared of his wife birthing a monster?" He didn't look at the other, noting how a fine line of almond brown had fallen over his face, as if slicing it, and he reached to tuck the hair back into hiding. His wife had given this headscarf to him, had threaded a simple diagonal pattern through it before Danel had decided to let her place her mouth on his. He could still remember his heart tripping over in his chest and taking his breath with it. 'I'd never felt anything like it.' He was soon frowning.

"He seems very excited," Baraqiel murmured.

Danel hesitated, then turned his head. "I've never asked — have you and Kokabiel always been like this?" He really meant to ask, 'Has Kokabiel always been like this?' "I didn't know you at all before the war."

Raising his hands, Baraqiel fiddled with his fingers some. "I didn't know Kokabiel before the war either." But he turned the conversation back to where it had been: "What will you do with your child, then? Will you try to raise it?"

Danel sighed, harsh. "I don't have another choice. I won't hurt my wife by trying to stop the pregnancy now." He gestured. "I came here

to see if I could find any large fish. She says she's very hungry and that nothing is filling for her."

The other angel hesitated, then murmured, "You cared so much for order in Heaven, brother. I don't understand how you were tempted against God for women—"

"I'm not going against God," snapped Danel. "You wouldn't understand. None of you young angels can understand." There was a flicker of hesitation, but soon venom slipped from his mouth shaped in the words: "All of you were nearly sinners. It's because of angels like you that Heaven allowed for wickedness."

'Sometimes,' Baraquel thought, 'I wonder if you trust in God or if you trust in your hate, and if God ever denied you hate, then you would deny Him.' But he didn't dare utter this aloud, stepping away to climb up the sand, listening to the sea behind him continue to roar. Maybe Danel would try and slaughter a whale, but if he did, Baraquel would not help him. 'And I fear,' he thought, 'that instead of walking on the water, it'll rise all around me in a flood and I'll fall into it. Fall, sink. Fallen angels and now sunken angels.'

And yet elsewhere Azazel was hurriedly moving in between many lines of humans, all with great baskets; most were overbrimming with crops, but some held grains and a few less with beef. Human sweat stench-ed heavy beneath the sun, made him recall how he'd once stood among the human hunters, watching them kill the large beasts of the forest, when he had still been unmarried, when he was just meeting the Earth, before he had grown to love his man. 'Time moves too fast here; the cold is already falling off the air, though the ground was frozen just last week.' The angel flinched, and the second of hesitation had him stumble as a man ran into his side. Opening his mouth, trying to apologize — but the stranger huffed up at Azazel with a wooden crate balanced on a shoulder, "Step aside, angel! Don't you know a new one was born today?"

"A new one?!" Azazel nearly cried. "A new child!? Do you know who—?"

"I don't," the man replied, brisk. "But I heard it was one of the Watchers that have stayed with us since the beginning."

At this, a sigh drifted from Azazel's mouth and he tried to reply,

“I’m sorry—” A loud gurgle shadowed his words, and the bewildered angel turned to see maybe two dozen humans gathered by a woman sitting atop a stone podium at the city’s center. She had a wistful smile, a beautiful, tender stare — over her head, there was a pale blue draping sheet — and in her arms, there was a creature, cradled like a savior. Momentarily, it could have been mistaken for an infant, but the texture on its skin soon shifted from half meat to half feather, akin to a bird breaking from its shell prematurely. And though it was squirming, the mother continued in her bliss, even as those nearby, primarily men, crowded and crouched to press food, just like that being carried by the crowd, into its couple mouths. Growls of hunger swept from the monster, became laps of its tongue at the nearest apple it soon, in a violent snap, shut its jaw around.

The crowd, in awe, laughed and cheered as the child crunched the fruit between teeth, woefully flat for its beast of an appetite. When it swallowed, it shuddered. The half-angel grew just a little bigger.

Azazel, painfully, asked, “Is that what the food you’re all carrying is for? The children?” He wanted to say, ‘Stop feeding the children. Stop it now.’ But his stomach felt as if it was in a tightening, cruel knot, and he had to find Armoni before his abdomen split. There was an acute wrongness within him, growing larger just like that beast with its mother.

“Yes,” the man answered mundanely. “We’re setting some food aside, but not too much. We’re already struggling to feed all of the people you’ve made us responsible for.”

Azazel thought to demand why the humans were making preparations at all, why they cared, why they were not just ignoring these monsters, why they fed them — but he said, “Excuse me.” He brushed past quickly, lowering his head and heading toward the greatest building in the city, toward a wide doorway almost as crowded as the scene he had left. Once again, it was primarily men; they lifted their heads and stared at the angel approaching with suspicion in their eyes. Azazel tried to move past them quickly, though he felt their gazes fall onto his back with a searing weight. When he caught a woman beside a pillar, one hand on it while the other was over her stomach, he moved toward her. “Hello. Do you know where I can find Armoni?”

“Armoni?” She was visibly pregnant, some months along; Azazel had been told now it took about nine before a child was born, usually, but when it was these half-angel beasts, it was much less — only about 20 weeks. And the woman’s face was so tired it appeared to be falling, dripping, the ends of her lips tugged downward. “My husband.” Over her head, Miriam donned a woven cloth, so long that it was draped over her body up until her knees. “You want to speak to him?”

“Yes.” Azazel nodded, slowly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t recognize you. This is the first time we’ve spoken. Armoni is a good friend of mine—”

“He’s never mentioned you.”

His lips twitched. “Well, I consider him a good friend.”

“Why do you want to see him? Haven’t you heard? You angels that are loyal to Enoch are being cast out from here—”

Her face was growing pink from her snapping, but Azazel held his ground, trying to have patience even when none was being offered to him. He said, “Please.” He was an angel; he still had the patience of one. “I want to talk to him. It won’t be for long. Please.”

Miriam stared at him, face muddled, gaze flickering to the doorway then back at him. Softly, she murmured, “He’s down that corridor.” She gestured. “To the left. Don’t let my brothers catch you.” The woman nodded, then scampered past, toward the men who had been at the door. Immediately, she called their attention, asking them about the new child who had been born today, asking them if they’d seen any large animals to hunt and kill, too.

Azazel didn’t hesitate, turning on his heel and heading in the direction Armoni’s wife had indicated. He tried to keep his steps quiet, lowering his head again, holding his breath just in case. At his side, he noticed murals, some depicting beastly creatures with sharpened teeth and horns, in red and yellows. One hand drifted to touch the doorway that Armoni was through, which was shut off from the corridor by a hanging, embroidered sheet, but he stared at the walls, thinking that he had seen something like this before, ‘somewhere else.’ He moved forward, not wasting any time he’d been told was precious and fleeting.

A finger over his lips — Armoni was on the bed with his mouth puckered as if he were prepared to shush the other angel. He was lying on his side, by the window, a heap of an elderly man snoring softly on

the mattress right beside him. The room itself was fairly neat, save for a bowl on the ground, filled nearly to the brim with watery-pale bile. “Don’t be so loud,” whispered Armoni. “He just fell asleep. He was vomiting so much that I thought he was going to die.” He sighed the words, then took a strand of his curled blond hair that had escaped the clutches of his usual, large braid. “But he’s always acting like that, acting like he’ll die. And he never does. I thought Cain’s people were cruel to ignore him at first, but now I see why they don’t bother to worry.”

“This is Elder Adam?”

“That it is. He’s such a pitiful thing, isn’t he? I can’t help but feel guilty for the humans. If us angels, if *Lucifer*, had never gotten caught up in love, men and women would have remained as the mindless animals they were before God placed them in Eden.” He, slowly, moved away from the man, off the mattress, so elegant he may as well have been hovering. And when he neared Azazel, he admitted, “I’ve been avoiding you.”

“You have,” Azazel whispered. “What’s happening, Armoni? I heard rumors that your people want to banish Enoch’s away. We only just got here—”

“It’s been months.” Armoni’s voice was delicate as glass, whereas Azazel felt like he’d shattered. “So many children born... Six, I believe. Seven today. And my wife will have one soon. Adam’s sons are very excited.” Gingerly, Azazel reached for Armoni’s wrist but simply touched it. “Samyaza may have ignored the pregnancy for as long as he could, but everyone noticed it, and though he continues to do nothing — the men have made their own plans.”

“I’m scared, Armoni.”

“The men hate God. They’ve always hated Him, but they kept it quiet in their hearts. They even feigned interest in our proselytizing when we arrived — but now they see these giant creatures, still infants but growing quickly. They know that through the joining of angels and man, we’ve created sin. That is what those infant monsters are; they are sin, they are disobedience.” He was speaking faster, pulling his hand away from Azazel, but he didn’t raise his voice. “We’ve made a horrible mistake. And we will never be forgiven. I feel dirty.”

“Armoni—”

“I’m sorry. This is how you must’ve felt after Mammon took your innocence.”

Azazel breathed, low and long, then said, “Brother, please tell me if it’s true that we’re going to be banished.”

“The only reason you’ve been allowed to stay at all is because of Adam.” Armoni gestured and, almost as if at his word, the elder stirred. “He’s the one who made the promise to take in any humans in need, but he is so old that he can’t fight his greedy children. His sons are hungry for power, and I believe they see these giant infants as weapons. When my wife bears her son, they’ll worship it.” He swallowed visibly, turned to the groaning Adam, who’d begun to blink his beady eyes at them. Azazel opened his mouth, but Armoni spoke once more, “I’ll be leaving you, Adam. You’ll be alright. You always are.”

The elder was looking at Azazel, but he spoke to Armoni, “You’re the one I’m worried about, angel.” He shut his eyes again. “But take care. Forgive me for what my sons do.”

Azazel raised a brow at Armoni. “Where are you going?”

“I’ll be going with you,” Armoni sighed. “I’ll be back, I won’t leave my wife to be killed by her brothers.”

“You love her?”

“I don’t,” said Armoni, “but I’m the angel of virtue. Have you forgotten?” Azazel almost said, ‘I have. Teach me how to be good again, brother. Please.’ “But I have something to do at Mount Hermon. So, I’ll go with you.”

“Now?”

“No, not now, but you should leave as fast as you can. Tell Enoch’s people to gather their belongings before the tribe here forms a mob against them. If they leave with minimal resistance, things will go well. And I will join you when I can.”

Unsure if there was anything else he could do, Azazel decided to nod, to reel in another breath as well, then step backward. “I hope things don’t become... dire.” His friend looked at him and no words left his mouth, but his eyes said that all things were already dire. Azazel refused to acknowledge it, craning his head to Adam, whispering that he wished him well, then he stumbled past the curtain, back into the

hallway, twisted around at the sound of puzzled noises that soon turned into shouts. It was the men that Miriam had been speaking to, now pointing and calling after him. Azazel hurried toward them, flicking out his wings to push them back before stepping out into the sun. Then, he took off into the air, ignoring a Watcher who saw him and shouted his name.

If Armoni's warning was true, he needed to act. He had to speak to Samyaza. He had to speak to his husband and his family.

As he rose high above the city, saw still the clamor for the monster infant, Azazel found his face cringing, his heart shriveling, and his stomach tightening even more. There was something wrong with him. He could feel it. He didn't know what it was. 'I'm so worried. I'm so confused.' He kept hurrying. 'Everything is so frightening.' Azazel saw now that the newest born had been taken out to the center, and it was being lifted by a man, showed to an awe-filled human crowd — mother nowhere to be seen, Watcher nearby, looking more frightened by his child than mesmerized like the onlookers. It was, after all, a monstrosity of eyes, of ever-shifting unknowable skin, sat over organs, each pulsing, each a heart — like all the other half-angels. The baby cried, and it was giant, and it held the weight of flesh but volatile of spirit. And the hunger of a God.

Azazel traveled to the outskirts, pulling his wings back inside perhaps too quick, falling too rough, yelping as he tripped over his feet and almost crashed onto the ground. He examined his surroundings, saw that a few humans were looking to him, but he paid them no mind, beginning to hurry in the direction of the hut where he'd been staying with his husband. A hand raised to his stomach once more, without thinking. "Eitan!" He moved for the doorway only to startle when a child stepped out, then leaned against the hut.

Naamah chuckled. "My uncle will be back soon. He said he's not feeling well."

The angel sighed, shakily. "Ah." 'I'm not feeling well either.' "Do you know where he went?"

Shrugging. "On a walk."

"Well, please tell his grandmother to start gathering her belongings." Azazel looked back, seeing the city that he hadn't realized they'd

stayed in for so long, but time moved so fast here, on Earth. It was all too fast. He turned his head and saw Naamah, saw that the end of their tunic reached marginally higher than he remembered when they first met. The child was aging. Time was passing, and Azazel was desperate to latch on, to stop every awful thing that he could feel heading toward them. "Let me find Samyaza." The child asked if they were going to have to move once more. "I don't know. Nothing is certain."

Elsewhere, the angel Danel returned to find his wife on the Earth ground of her tent with a goat torn open beside her. Her hands were fists with strings of muted-red meat drooping down from between her fingers, her eyes bloodshot and crazed, her body trembling; and a heady, gurgled sound escaped through the raw in her mouth. Death-drawn insects were already buzzing, one landing on a cheekbone. The animal skin of her clothes had lost its earth-color to the gore spilled over her. She was hungry, she murmured to Danel and said no more.

CHAPTER 26



‘**T**here’s hardly to eat by Mount Hermon,’ Samyaza thought miserably, ‘but it’ll have to do.’ He took a cow bone, some minuscule hints of skin and meat still clinging to it, then reached to shove it into the face of his child peeking over his left shoulder. Bundled in cloth and strapped to the angel’s back, the infant happily took it between seven lips, teeth poking through to graze the bone before it’d even entered its mouth. The monster ate -- in a foul screech, the cow’s remains were shredded by the angel’s ear — as he turned his attention toward the handkerchief on the ground he’d picked the bone from. It was empty of anything but crumbs now, as was the hut itself.

Hastily, Samyaza took the cloth, folding it in his hands until it was small enough of a square that he could slide it snugly between a leather belt and his hip to hold it without trouble. And he sighed, loud, straightening up to stand, then turning toward the doorway, moving toward it unsteadily, stepping out. A grimace came over his face, so abrupt it was an assault, so alien that it could’ve belonged to a stranger. Only a few arm-lengths away, his wife did nothing to dissipate the feeling; she was speaking with her mother, carrying a bundle of things in her arms, the same as the three children at her side. ‘My own children too,’ Samyaza thought. Mortal humans, but his children nonetheless.

She was looking better; her hair was tied back, and her face had regained some form, the swell of her stomach had lessened, though not her breasts, which she said often pained her, and Samyaza always apologized. "Should I try to heal you?" he'd asked one dusk — because he had healed her between the legs when it seemed the blood would never stop flooding. But Idith said that there was nothing to heal; she wasn't broken; she was in pain, but she wasn't broken. Samyaza felt similar, so he'd kissed her soft, but she didn't smile against his lips. She was now often struggling to do it — to smile.

He kissed her, now, on the cheek "I love you." Then, he stepped away, though not without offering a slight smile to the human children, who presented smiles just as troubled back. Many of them flickered their gaze to the creature, who lingered its head by the shoulder of their angel father. Or angel mother, or whatever it could be that he was. The angel of their mother. Their guardian angel.

A crowd of humans had already formed, their belongings all gathered in their arms or at their backs. Between them, some cattle yapped and cried, pulling against flimsy rope leashes, the sounds of them tangled with the complaints of children, the screeches of infants in familial arms, and the couple howls of the giant creatures held tight by Watcher parents. Some of Enoch's people had torn down their huts, others were arguing over whether to do this themselves, but soon Samyaza had raised an arm and began shouting for their silence. He could see, too, the sons of Adam standing away from the mob but not far enough to make their presence discreet. Painstakingly, they'd ensure every last one of Enoch's people left.

Azazel saw them, as well; he stood much closer to them and the city walls, staring and wondering if Armoni was still trapped in the house of Adam. 'Should I wait for you? You didn't say.' A gurgle in his stomach responded to that, so strong it appeared to have rippled the skin of his abdomen. "Ah—" Instantly, a hand of his flew to where the sensation had been, but there was nothing there, just the cotton material of his tunic and his belly rising with his deep breath.

"Azazel?" Eitan put his hand on him, his arm. "Is something wrong?"

"No." 'I hope not.' Tepidly, he shook his head, turning back to his

husband and family all nearby, even Naamah, who argued with a cousin. “Do you have the water?” He looked to the clay jug that Eitan held, that Azazel would take off his hands soon; he carried very little himself, had just finished tearing down their little makeshift home. “I see you do.” He blinked some drowsy from his eyes, then reached to rub at them, but the man took his hand as it was in the air, tugged it toward him, and pressed his lips to the knuckles. “Oh—”

“Everything will be okay, angel.” Eitan smiled, but it didn’t reach his eyes. “We never belonged here anyway. And if Michael returns, then he’ll have to wrestle with me to get to you.”

Azazel tried a smile. “He’ll destroy you.” And he waited for Eitan to perhaps joke or coyly reply something about how he’d be happy to die for love, but there was a hesitance on his face that proved fatal. Immediately, shouts reached them, and Azazel saw the sons of Adam again, many holding spears but not jabbing at anyone quite yet. There were, too, some of Cain’s other descendants sitting atop the walls, many children and adolescents who had climbed to stare at Enoch’s people. “Let’s hurry.” He breathed out through his nostrils, hoping Armoni was safe. “Let’s avoid conflict.”

Samyaza shouted again for the people of the exodus to look at him, gesturing over his head and beginning to walk. ‘I’ll lead them on foot for a few hours.’ He could hand the child on his back to his wife later. “Everyone, this way!” The angel kept waving, kept moving, and some of the crowd moved along with him, trailing behind even as they ran into one another and their animals and the couple of things that fell with thumps and clangs. The more they approached, the stronger the stench of them was — the sweat and musk of humans unbathed for too long after refusing the bathing pools of Cain’s city. Of Adam’s city.

“They’re rebelling against Adam,” Azazel had told Samyaza a few days ago, shakily holding his hands at his lap, as they sat at a stone bench near the center. “His sons.”

“But why would they want us to leave?” Samyaza had furrowed his brow, looking in the direction of where the huts of Enoch’s people were.

With a shift of uncertainty, Azazel had replied, “They want to use their surplus of food on their half-angel children, instead of having to

waste it feeding Enoch's people." Turning his head, slowly, he'd added much quieter, "They keep growing, Samyaza. The children. They're already giant. Aren't you scared?"

Samyaza had swallowed. "But what else is there to do?" "Kill it? Do you want me to kill my child, Azazel?"

"I don't know." Shaking his head, laughing, the tone of it tinged horrified. "Not at all." 'I heard what your wife said at the birth, Samyaza. If I ask you to kill it, I'm asking you to kill her.'

But the leader of the Watchers continued with his commands for everyone to follow him, follow him through the desert they had passed when they came here. He said that the Watchers would ensure they'd all remain safe for the several days it took. He had enough water to heal them, he said. 'But I'm not sure. I have to ensure my children and my wife don't die of thirst before anything else.' He told them that they would make it, and some young girl was crying somewhere. He heard her but didn't see her.

Armoni didn't watch them leave, standing in Adam's room and ignoring the sound of his wife screaming at one of her brothers out in the hall. Elegantly, he was adjusting his earrings, using the reflection on a small basin of water by the doorway that reminded him faintly of Heaven. Then, he worked on his braid, humming a tiny song, before the grunt of the elderly man called his attention. He turned his head and saw him, lying as limp as always in his flowered bed. "You said it was at the foot of the mountain by a cherry tree, right?" Armoni would go out through the window.

"Yes." The man croaked it, his eyes shut.

"Will you tell me how you know now?"

"Another time."

"You tell me every story except the ones I'd like to hear."

Adam laughed, but he didn't argue.

And for Enoch's people, the grueling return was much slower than the pilgrimage to Cain's city that had seemed so hopeful once. The giant children, even as bound as they were in cloth, were mammoths, were forever conceiving new limbs that made them heavier and more difficult to keep a grasp on. So, the Watchers carried them, shuffled along the sand ground with man, woman, child, and only ever flew to

scope their surroundings briefly. Throughout this, Azazel continued with the discomfort in his gut and a new heat on his face.

Whenever the time came for rest, the angel found himself inching away from the arms of his husband, and he found sleep never coming to him. Constantly, he rubbed his eyes, stared at the jug of water he was becoming oddly desperate to slurp from — but he was an angel and that doomed him to sacrificing his wants for the needs of humans — food, water. At times, he would sit up during the latest hours, stare up at the moon, and listen to the rustle of humans huddled together to sleep. He often turned his head to see Naamah staring at him, but he refused to explain, laying back down and praying for dreams that wouldn't come. Praying to no one. 'God, would you still let me pray to you? Do you take the prayers of those you've forsaken? Will you let me dream? I'd like to dream. I feel wrong. It's all starting to feel wrong.'

On one of the final mornings, he asked Eitan to kiss him. Azazel had noticed that they were in the back of the crowding and not at all noticed, and the man smiled, though strained, and placed his mouth on him, 'but now I'm worried your lips were not made for mine, and that God didn't make me for you.' He pulled back, touched his chest. 'What now? What if our love isn't perfect? What should I do? If God isn't between us, then we might be too close, touching too much.' Still, he wanted another kiss. 'I need to be kissed more, don't I? Maybe love will fill it, the hole in me now that I'm abandoned by God.' Their lips met and locked another time, then they gathered their bags, their few belongings, and Azazel gingerly touched the dagger at his waist.

Together, they ushered their family to hurry so that they could finally arrive, maybe before sundown. Instead, all the humans arrived at the desolation they'd abandoned just as the stars had appeared to blink their luminous eyes at them. Not midnight, but dark enough already to think so.

Samyaza instructed the majority of the crowd to begin organizing into the huts that were still standing and for some to immediately help create temporary shelter to make up for all the homes destroyed in the attacks from the demons and angels. Who would attack next? He couldn't be certain. One woman called out, asking where Enoch was, but the angel's child had begun to gurgle, still strapped to his back, and

Samyaza concerned himself with it instead. ‘You’re hungry.’ They hadn’t even named it yet. ‘We’re going to need food. We need it desperately.’ “Start planting whatever seeds you have!” he ordered, ignoring the woman who’d spoken to him. “Anything! And gather fruits, nuts! Within a few days, we’ll send out hunters again!”

And within a few days, Armoni arrived. The escape had been a little more difficult than planned, but he’d managed to do it while the sons of Adam spoke with their groaning patriarch. Unfortunately, he hadn’t managed to plan the fleeing in advance, and he left without anything but the tunic on his body and a few jewels. However, he’d been able to fly, fly fast without the weight of any monster in his arms and without the need to wait for human companions. He stopped for nothing, not sleep or water or even rest — only to come upon the settlement where Enoch’s people were with a frown. ‘This is the ruin that they call home?’ He’d become accustomed to the wealth of Adam’s city, though he’d found that pitiful too.

Gracefully, Armoni landed beneath a morning sun, and flapped his freckled gray wings before sliding them back into his body. Quickly, he groaned, reached for his hip and felt his knees knock together. ‘I’ve forgotten how to walk.’ Armoni grumbled to himself nonsensically, then looked around at huts, the humans who were preparing for their day. ‘Where does Azazel live? With his man? Where does that man live?’ He’d even forgotten his name.

He didn’t like him, frankly.

“Armoni?” The voice of a Watcher, right nearby. “What are you doing here?”

“Tell me where Azazel is.”

“What? He’s with Eitan.”

“Where is that man?”

It was just a wave of the arm, but Armoni nodded, then began in that direction. He saw forestry looming and the curves of the nearby river ripple, as well as a cluster of huts. Though quite prepared to barge into each looking for his friend, Armoni quickly felt it wasn’t necessary. There was a dark-skinned angel outside, turned away and hunched, head hanging forward, one hand on the wall of a hut, drifting as he walked slowly.

“Azazel?” Armoni hurried to him, and he took him into his arms just as Azazel gasped, the choked sound of it wet. Shaking, Azazel kept trying to stagger away from the home. “What’s wrong? What’s happening?” Azazel was clutching his stomach, each wheeze reeled out from his mouth weighted and wet, but still, he nodded his head at the trees that Armoni had noticed a minute ago. “You want to go into the woods?” The other angel nodded, but with noticeable, pained effort, only then to open his mouth, like he hoped to say a few words, but none came.

Armoni tugged him closer, at this, and walked, listening to the scrape of Azazel’s bare feet stumbling over the Earth.

In the seconds after they reached the greenery, Azazel broke away with a heave, his heart dropping to his stomach, and he clutched it together, wanting to burrow in his fingers past the skin and scratch beneath, at whatever might be beneath. It couldn’t be blood; it felt too restless to be blood, felt alive, squirmed hot and up into his throat, making him vomit out a breath. His stomach lurched, twisted so tight he feared it would tear under the strain. And the heat had risen to his face now, to his eyes now — blinking as hints of tears caught in the spindles of his eyelashes.

‘I’m dying,’ Azazel wanted to cry, falling to lean against some bark, the sound of his friend nearby quieter than it should be. ‘God is killing me.’ As he dragged down the side of the tree, the bristles of wood scratching almost through the tunic, he groaned, long and almost *hungry*. He tumbled over, landing on the dirt just as Armoni fell to his knees beside him, took him in an embrace again. ‘Eitan.’ Azazel told him once that he would watch him rot in a coffin. ‘Where are you?’ His man had left him early. ‘Or was it I who crawled out from the hammock we share?’ They were sleeping on a hammock; there were nearly no beds; they slept in a hut without a roof. If it rained soon, they would be drenched.

The world above, the clouds, were gray, the sea in between them grayer. And the breeze was humid, sticking to him. He breathed. Azazel, feeling his body quiver, reeled in some of the wet air, and then he curved forward as he released it. Like a knocking, pain pounded at his abdomen, but soon it trickled out too. Every inch of him felt so

uncomfortably damp that he didn't realize it at first, but Armoni made a noise of surprise, then called his name — "Azazel, Azazel!" The angel lowered his gaze, slow like weights he was careful not to put down too quick or he would pull a muscle, pull a tendon, rip something within that would search for any orifice it could find on his body to bleed out from. And if there is none, then the body creates one — tears flesh, punctures skin.

Crimson red, clinging and pooling, from his thighs, poured until it became a flood onto the grass; initially, it was a brighter, living red, but it soon became dark, coppery clots.

"I'm sorry," Azazel cried. "Lord, I'm sorry." He pressed into his friend as his body twitched, eyes filling as if they would join in the bleeding, but only rain cut itself loose from him, rolling past his cheeks, then chin, then Heaven tunic that was forever staining beyond washing. Beyond fixing. Beyond forgiving. 'I asked for forgiveness once. You granted it to me.' The angel wailed, even as his friend held him to his chest, whispering to calm him; Azazel cried so harsh he felt the scrapes of sadness up from his chest into his throat, into his very mouth. 'Or maybe you never did.' His chest rose, fell, rapid enough that it was as if his sternum were trying to escape. He would split from this, he thought. 'You're going to kill me.' "God is killing me." 'He has never forgiven me. He has never loved me.'

In the final spill of blood, there were some half-made eyes, half-colored minuscule hands.

'If God ever loved me, He would not have made me.'

Armoni held him tighter, and they were silent, only the wheezes of Azazel's agony in between them but melting into the sea of rustling trees, distant animal howls of death and those for sex. Azazel shut his eyes, and the drum of his heart was growing dimmer. Some words left his mouth, those that may have been "Don't tell my man," or "Don't tell Samyaza," or even "Keep this a secret for eternity." Instead of speaking, Armoni kissed his hair and reached for his cape and tugged it off. With smooth strokes, he cleaned him like he often did that old man he'd just left.

'But I don't feel much better,' Azazel thought as Armoni later gripped him, pulled him up, and tried to return him to the hut. 'Not at

all.’ Armoni said he would wash his clothes while Azazel slept. Azazel, trembling, simply looked at the village that had no clue of the horror he’d just experienced and allowed himself to be lugged along, taken to a hammock, then undressed. Without thinking, he tugged out his wings, felt them at need for a preening, then blanketed himself with them. He shut his eyes, gasping for some breath but trying to sleep. Every sense he was forced to feel was too much, suddenly. He needed darkness, didn’t even notice when Armoni had stepped out again.

Azazel didn’t realize he’d fallen asleep until a hand was on his shoulder, and his eyes cracked to note Eitan hovering over him. The man’s voice — “I’m sorry to wake you. I wanted to say that I’m going to lead a hunt tomorrow morning, with a lot of men, and ask if you want to come with us.” But then Eitan brushed the feathers of one of his wings, blinking to reveal worried eyes. “What’s wrong, angel?” The angel smiled gently at that; he was still an angel, damned but still an angel.

“Yes. I’ll go with you.” What could he say? ‘Eitan, one of the giants was forming beneath my skin.’ Eitan would ask how that was possible. ‘I’m not sure. I hope it doesn’t happen again.’ But, Eitan would say, aren’t you an angel? Only women carry giants. Are you a woman, Azazel? ‘I’m not carrying anything.’ But you were. ‘No. It’s proof I’m not a woman that it died in me.’ Eitan would stare at him. ‘Didn’t I tell you I’m a man before we consummated? You only love men.’

When the men were sent to hunt, the very next day, Azazel painted his face. He did it to hide the sad tug of his eyes, to mystify the men and not frighten them with his deep frowns. And Eitan kissed him when he saw him, holding his cheeks, and pressing so deep that Azazel didn’t really stir from the sensation until he found himself approaching the forest. By the trees, the men drew breaths at the sight but said nothing, not immediately. It wasn’t until they had their first rest at noon that the hunters settled to ask and listen when Azazel explained how in Heaven he used to paint his lips just like this, he adorned his eyelids, dyed his skin in patterns that the men couldn’t understand, often hiding little eyes in his hands.

At this, the men spoke of how Earth used to be and of how it was now. The giants, they said. The hunger, they said. All this anger —

“Oh, curse God!” A man jabbed his spear into the ground, and some hushed him, but not the angel, nor Eitan. “Curse Him for how He has left us. I don’t believe in any original sin! I’ve never done anything wrong! All I’ve dared to do is be born!”

Except his eyes were on Azazel, and some of the other men also glanced at him, as if waiting for the angel among them to speak of goodness and perseverance. But Azazel still carried the weight of the dead giant, beneath his bones, and the weight of Heaven. Forgiveness. “I remember,” he told them, and the men leaned a bit closer, Eitan at his side, “when we angels hated God for a night.” He thought, ‘I feel a part of me is gone now, bleed out somewhere in this forest.’ “It was the first war.” And the angel Azazel plucked his dagger from his waist and showed the men the working of the silver. “Let me tell you,” he began, “about war.”

CHAPTER 27



It was not all horrible, for a week or two. The birds still sang, and the wind still rustled the branches, the leaves, like waking them; and when Azazel heard footsteps at the entrance, he raised his head out of the feather cocoon he'd bundled himself in. He saw an old woman, smiling and carrying a clay bowl in her hands of brown lentils, some cuts of carrot floating among it, bobbing up their heads. The smell was rich; it crept along toward Azazel's nose, and he smiled before he could help it, pulling back his wings to slither toward his spine, as if each appendage was a snake and angels were really over-full with serpents beneath their skin.

He was dressed in just a loincloth, like his husband often wore, but his hair was wrapped and raised. "I'm sorry." Touching his face, Azazel's fingers brushed some dried paint smeared there. "I've been very tired. Don't feed me. You're the one who needs to eat." But she kept approaching, shuffling her feet until she was at his side. "Really. I shouldn't have it."

She laughed: "Let me feed an angel my human soup. I want to hear what he thinks."

Azazel's gaze flickered to the bowl, then back to her wrinkles of age. "There isn't much to eat." He paused, then wrestled his legs against the hammock, bringing himself to sit on it, groaning in

exhaustion that resting hadn't relieved. And he said, "You'll die of hunger."

"I'll die anyway."

Azazel felt the fingers of the old woman touch his forehead, brush some of the tiny curls there. Watching her, he saw the deep brown of her eyes, then replied, quietly, "Give it to Naamah then."

"Naamah is off in the forest to hunt for mice." The old woman's shoulders shook in a cough at the same moment that Eitan walked through the doorway, spear in hand, setting it down. "Eitan," she immediately snapped, drawing away from the angel, "where have you been?"

"I just stepped out a moment." He moved to her, touched the hands that held the bowl, then leaned to press his lips to her cheek. "What are you doing here, bothering my angel?"

"Well, you told me he seems sick."

"Grandmother—"

"And I thought to help."

"Sick?" Azazel frowned, looking between her and his husband, before moving off the hammock, taking some steps toward his man and his grandmother. "No," he told her, "I'm not sick. Angels don't get ill the way you humans do."

"Oh?" The woman laughed. "No fevers? No sniffing? No coughs?"

The angel almost immediately affirmed her before realizing that he'd had plenty of fevers before, had sniffled, had coughed and hacked in between crying. "Well, sometimes. When we feel very strongly, I suppose." 'Angels — we get sick from feeling too much.'

"Then you're sick from sadness?" she teased. "In that case, soup will also help."

Eitan took her arm and began tugging. "Grandmother, please don't bother him this early." She was laughing, and he kissed her head. "And— No, it's alright. I don't want any soup for myself. We just brought back a sloth to eat." It had been a mammoth of a creature, so big it could feed hundreds, or that would be the case if there weren't giants in their midst. Was Samyaza organizing that? Was he cutting a great portion for his children and leaving the rest for the others? 'In

some ways, I'm braver than you are, Samyaza. You were too weak to kill your child, but I did it without thinking. Without even meaning to.' "Yes, I'll make sure you get a big portion. Now leave us, please." Azazel had to speak with Samyaza.

The angel sighed, slow and drawn out, then raised his sight to his husband ushering his grandmother out the doorway. "Eitan," he called simply.

Turning back around, the man laughed with a touch of anxiety. "Azazel." He wiped his hands, though they were unstained, on his cloak before untying it at his shoulder, tugging it off, and leaving himself in a simple tunic. "Please forgive me. You know how my grandmother is. She said she could sense something was different with me, and that it must be because of you." Azazel raised a brow; he hadn't thought anything was different with Eitan, though perhaps he'd been caught up in his own troubles. "I told her you were acting strange and a few times I heard you coughing outside, and I touched you, and you felt warm. I thought you might be sick."

"I'm not sick," Azazel whispered. 'Not anymore.'

"I know, but I didn't know how to explain it." He stepped closer, snugly bundled Azazel in the cloak he'd just removed, then smiled. "But I've noticed it. I was afraid to say anything. I was hoping you would tell me yourself." Azazel appreciated it; if he'd been asked what was wrong a mere moment after the incident, he might've gone mad like the devil. "And since that other angel has been around, I thought maybe it was something you two were keeping to yourself."

Armoni. Azazel had hardly seen him; after ensuring he wasn't dying, Armoni had begun venturing deep into the forest. He had said it was nothing important, told Azazel to worry about recovering instead. He was often gone, didn't even return to spend the cool nights.

Softly, Eitan teased, "Will you let a puny human like me know of you angels and your troubles?"

Azazel smiled as the man took his cheeks in rough palms. "It's nothing, really. Just sadness." It was true; the beast in him was gone; only emptiness remained; somehow, emptiness was filling too. "Though I do worry for my angel friend." Eitan asked if he meant that

blonde, curly-haired one. “Yes, Armoni. He’s very attractive, isn’t he? When—” He almost hesitated, then remembered he’d already told Eitan of the war, the same as he had told all the hunters, though the shared knowledge hadn’t seemed to spark any consequences yet. “When the war ended, and some of us angels asked for penance, everyone believed Armoni slept with angels, but it’s not true. He’s always been obsessive about purity and cleanliness, maybe that’s why he always looks so nice.”

“I haven’t noticed,” Eitan chuckled. “Another angel has all my attention.” A sweet, bashful angel smile responded. “But yes, I saw him. He was entering the forest, but he didn’t have anything with him.”

Azazel hummed, but then Eitan pressed his mouth to his. “Mm. You’ve been kissing me more often.” He felt the hands on his face move down to his waist. “Are you falling in love with me again?”

“I think I am,” Eitan chuckled warmly against his lips. “But I also think you just look very nice when you paint your face. Will you teach me?” “Do you see this, God? Do you see me sharing all the knowledge of angels with humans, even that which Heaven forbade after the war?” “Of course.”

Some days later, he searched for Samyaza.

The leader of the Watchers was beneath the sun, sitting with one of his children, a non-monstrous daughter, and for a moment, Azazel was relieved. He didn’t like the sight of Samyaza’s beastly child, particularly since the incident in the forest. With a swallow, then, Azazel approached, hands moving to hold each other behind his back, brushing the dagger that had ridden along his belt to his hip. “Brother.” Samyaza’s child turned quicker, the girl beaming at him, though not particularly bright. “I hope I’m not interrupting.” Samyaza saw him, some surprised blinks curtaining his eyes.

“No,” he said, then looked at the girl. “We were just on a walk and started talking.”

“You can eat,” interjected the girl, “flowers. I don’t know if you angels know that.” Angels were well aware of that, but Azazel was also quite sure that everything was edible; he thought he could eat a star, if he ever returned to the sky, and if not, then definitely a moon, or any

one of the icy comets streaming like tears across the dark face of the universe.

“Well,” Samyaza said, one of his hands going to the child, by her straight hair, unlike her mother’s and unlike Samyaza’s. “What do you need, Azazel? I feel like we don’t see each other often now. We need to talk more. Maybe I’ll call a meeting at Mount Hermon soon.”

Azazel stared for a moment, swallowed, then sighed, “There’s something I wanted to tell you. In private.”

With a glance at his daughter, Samyaza paused, then cocked his head. “I’m with my child. Is it urgent?”

“I suppose—” Azazel didn’t want to insist, and as far as he knew, this was a problem already resolved and that he was only bringing up again because he felt as if he were keeping a secret, but it couldn’t be a secret, could it? ‘What is the point in telling him? What would Samyaza do? Nothing that Armoni or my husband couldn’t do.’ “I suppose it’s not. How have you been? How is your... child? The youngest.” ‘The monster.’

“Oh, he’s with his mother—” Samyaza chuckled. “I’m assuming it’s a he.”

“No easy way to tell?” Azazel replied, more of a tease than a genuine question.

“Not for long.” And they both laughed at this. “But I heard some gurgles from it. I think it’ll grow to speak. And not knowing if it’s a he or not— That isn’t too bad, is it? That child we met when we first arrived. I remember how we thought it was a he, and then a she.” Naamah; Azazel remembered them and thought they looked a bit more womanly now, but he still wasn’t sure. ‘Maybe I’m just mistaking tired melancholy on a child’s face for girlishness.’

“Yes,” Azazel replied, unsure what else would have sufficed as an answer. “In that case, I’ll leave you now. It wasn’t important — what I wanted to say.” He’d now lost interest in speaking of the incident much at all. “But if you do call for that meeting at Mount Hermon—” The sun felt very warm against the skin of his back, and he realized he still had both hands behind him, and his arm brushed the dagger again, which he had tried to urge Samyaza to kill his child with. “I—”

The screams of a woman blared from the left, and both angels

jerked their heads in that direction, Azazel catching Samyaza instinctively push his daughter behind him. Before them, they saw the middle-aged culprit of the noise sprinting from both whatever was chasing her and the Watchers themselves. Her thick tunic had jagged tears on it, as if claws had dragged down her back then reached hastily for the neckline, and she wore no shoes, bare feet over the ground, leaving spots of blood as she stomped over stray pebbles, but she made no move to stop. Staggering, Azazel would have run after her, at least to offer his sandals, but when he heard a wet gurgle from his left again, followed by another scream — this one from a man — and then yet another, he whipped his head around. His heart stuttered, then stopped.

The beast was one of the half-angel children, having grown now to the size of two men in length, one and a half in width, though it crawled on two pairs of limbs and yet another two, thin appendages bent before itself like the branches of a tree. It had hands, with two opposable thumbs, which it used to reach for whatever was before it — either living or static. A growl ripped through the same mouth it shoved everything into — a pot, a wooden pillar holding up a hut, then the straw of the hut's roof as it collapsed — *thud, thud*. Then, its teeth ground against the objects, breaking them through the crushing. It widened its mouth large enough to accommodate whatever came toward it — this thing of persisting movement, never able to stop shifting.

“A monster—” left Azazel's mouth.

But the beast then barreled forward, moving with such speed that all its bulk must've been a mirage. In a blur, it sped past them, toward huts further away, leaving screams in its wake, and soon, Samyaza was telling his child to run in the opposite direction. Azazel began running, too, but after the beast. He heard Samyaza follow behind, the drums of his feet on the ground, and then the flutter of both their wings sprouting at once. The two angels rose with quick, strong flaps, but as they did, they saw where the monster had driven itself, and they saw just as it snapped its jaws at a man, then again. The third time, it caught him by the waist, one of the monster's hands going to the victim's head and the other grabbing one of his

ankles. As if the human were on a skewer, the monster devoured him.

The flat teeth dug into the torso, grinding him until he broke, but if there was anything to thank the Lord for — it was quite quick. Limbs flailing, the man reached out, hands gripping the air like he'd find rope to wind around his hands and yank himself back to safety, but the beast was quicker to make a feast out of him. It tore him so fast that the man's scream was a mere second long, maybe half of which sounded just as he was pulled into a mouth that enlarged to accommodate him, gulped his pieces down, rippling its body. Still, Samyaza didn't miss any disgusting detail of this as he approached — his gaze catching every second of the *crunch*, then splatter of the man-turned-drivel flooding onto patches of grass in red. A wet swallow followed and a tongue flickered out to whisk an entrail stringing from its mouth

"Stop!" Samyaza may have said, but he was unsure; that would be a ridiculous thing to shout at a monster, unless it understood language. Did they understand? He remembered his child at his back, croaking but never babbling like the human infants. When he spoke, did his monster child understand? He'd hoped so, told himself the grunts were replies in some secret language that the tiny beast would reveal to its parent soon. But the monster before him didn't reply, turning around and barreling elsewhere just as Samyaza had taken it by the tail. He felt himself, suddenly, yanked forward, dragged along, wings whipping the air erratically, trying to keep up.

And, suddenly, he was hearing Azazel — shouting his name in high panic — as the golden smell of gore infiltrated his nose and mouth. 'Death smells like God,' Samyaza felt as he brought his other hand to the abdomen of the beast, dug in his fingers, feeling the squelch of its skin, so deeply reminiscent of the man devoured seconds ago. "Samyaza!" Azazel's voice came again. Samyaza wrenched himself forward, propelling his body with a beat of his wings, before hastily scaling along the creature to latch onto its squirming neck. With a grunt, he took it by the head and jerked it to the side, trying to maneuver it toward the forest, which was not nearby but, at the speed of the beast, they would arrive there in a blink.

Azazel reached them, throwing himself right at the side of Samyaza, taking the head, too, and pulling it upward with a yell of exertion.

“Get back, Azazel!” Samyaza nearly kicked him off.

“Be quiet!” Azazel raised an elbow, jamming it right into one of the beady eyes traveling all over the shifting flesh, and at this, the beast howled, toppling over. Both the angels shouted as the creature twisted, as if something had caught one of its many legs, then skidded along the ground, so much dirt kicking up into the air that neither angel noticed the hut they were about to crash into until another Watcher swooped down from above, tackling and throwing them off onto the ground. All three of the angels rolled over the dirt, wings flapping, legs kicking -- useless as each grasped frantically for anything to slow them down. Like the man had reached out to be saved before his death; Azazel flung out his hand, found a rock, grabbed it, and he felt his arm yank, then hold him in place, a harsh bolt of breath shooting out of his mouth. Ahead, the home erupted into splinters of wood, crumbling mud, collapse of straw, the sound of a scream inside -- all as the beast rammed into its foundation. Azazel was the first to recover, hurrying back onto his feet, jogging forward.

However, the other two angels were not far behind, as well as another Watcher who dropped from the sky, scampering toward the rubble alongside Azazel. And though the home had collapsed, there remained a single wall still standing, leaning, jagged; as if it cowered at the four angels hurrying over, the wall tilted some more, more, and then it was doubling over. It crashed to the ground just as Azazel arrived, and it revealed the beast. Azazel stared, eyes wide, his heart dull in his chest, so dull it felt empty. A soft exhale escaped him, and he heard the wails of a child, a human child, nearby, then the ones of a young woman, who had approached too. But all Azazel could do was stare and think, ‘*Lord.*’ Samyaza appeared at his side, opening his mouth, but whatever those first syllables were, they never strung into a word because he, too, reeled in a gasp.

The four angels looked on, as did the other Watchers arriving quickly after and a couple more humans, wringing their hands together. Together, they all watched, doing nothing, the horror grown so large it had sunk into every crevice of the Earth, become inter-

changeable with it. The beast was curled up amid the debris youthfully, clutching a carcass like a child would a toy. But the giant — it was now a true giant, only marginally smaller than the home it had just destroyed — had gained the mass of all the humans it had devoured. Later, they would learn it was four humans in total dead. But now, they only saw the giant continue to gnaw at the remaining bottom half of a man, suckling on it, suckling on the blood like an infant would on a mother.

“No more,” came hushed, strained words from Samyaza, feeble and thin as paper, “no more of these beasts.” Azazel fluttered his eyes shut; it was all he could do to escape the horror. “Never again.”

But in the forest, far from them, the elderly Enoch slept against a tree. When he heard a voice, he opened his eyes, believing himself to be waking, yet he saw pale light and squinted. “Who is there?” He raised both arms, over his face, barely peeking between fingers to catch an angel — brown-skinned, face spotted with specs of dark, long onyx hair covered by a lace veil.

“Enoch,” said the angel Dina, “don’t wake just yet. I am a dream. But when you do wake, you will return to your people, and you will share a message with them.” Hesitance, ever slight — “The Lord, our God — He is declaring war.”

CHAPTER 28



“What have we done?”
“What will we do?”

Samyaza had drifted away from the nine other Watchers, all of whom had gathered at the bank of the river, many seated on the rocks. He didn’t dare look at them, could hardly manage to raise his sight off the ground. He was swallowing, or attempting to, the shivers that continued to rake his body as he watched some humans huddled together and holding one another as they lamented the death of a friend or cried at the mere uncertainty of what had just occurred. First, it had been demons they feared, then it had been angels, and now there were these creatures that were neither man, nor demon, nor angel. Now, there were giants — the hungriest of which was beside its parent and quiet, satisfied after eating, not asleep but not moving as if it were quite alive either. “I said—” He didn’t recognize his own voice, but he turned back, still hesitating to meet any of their gazes. “I said that we won’t have anymore. No more children. You will tell your wives that under no circumstances will they bear the child of an angel.”

“And what of,” said the parent Watcher of the violent giant, “the ones already with us.” He didn’t look at his child, or if he did, Samyaza didn’t notice. Stopping short of the dip at the river’s shore, he laid his eyes upon it — the pale ripples on a body of blue, the occasional blur

of a fish passing by. There were fish in Heaven, he remembered. He didn't eat them; he never understood why Raphael did.

'Brother,' he remembered calling, lingering by the doorway, watching Raphael sit by his kitchen table on a tall chair, a quilt over his lap. With nimble fingers, he'd removed the skeleton of the fish with easy tenderness, but too slow a scalping. 'What are you doing?' Raphael had said he was going to eat it. 'The fish?' Flinching, nervous — but he was still young and dared not stop him. 'But it's alive.' Raphael had said the fruit was alive too, and so were the greens that they so often ate. Samyaza recalled how Raphael had answered it quietly but not with that air of wisdom he always carried, like it was something that deeply troubled him, that he couldn't make sense of. Samyaza now understood this as the moment in his life that he learned angels didn't know everything, that age might not make him any wiser. Or, perhaps, he was attaching meaning to a memory that had meant nothing. It was easier to think that all things happened for a reason.

"Samyaza," Azazel called, not with the urgency of when he'd chased after the leader of the Watchers and thrown himself at the beast alongside him — now, it was quiet and almost sad. He was sitting over a boulder, right at the bank, near to Samyaza, and there was a waterfall, small and gradual, that Samyaza found himself wanting to step into, to sink below of. "What do we do with the giants that have already been born?"

Samyaza met Azazel's eyes, the blue like he was as submerged as he wished to be — "We'll have to try and kill them."

Azazel swallowed harshly. He hadn't expected for his old housemate to say it so outright, but he noted the sullen drag on the features of Samyaza's face.

"Kill them?" echoed a Watcher. "But—"

Yet another Watcher called out, "The humans have scattered and are likely telling everyone in the tribe as we speak. They'll want to banish us all. They'll want us to rid of them."

"My child," said the angel of the monster with them, "was good." His voice was delicate, exceedingly fragile, and his eyes raised — a color like fog or clouds swollen with rain and threatening to drizzle. "I don't know what happened. I swear that I don't."

Azazel furrowed his brow, flicking his head in the angel's direction and responding, "What are you saying?! You don't know what happened?!" He rose to his feet, felt his hands curl into fists. "You're so ashamed that you're lying to yourself. Your child was hungry! And all these giants were *born* hungry!" He turned once more, stared at Samyaza who was half-facing away, his lips pressed into a fine line. "I saw it. When I saw the very first giant born, I could feel how hungry it was and," the memory rushed him of the bloodied thing on the ground, a creature that had broken and rotted him from the inside out, "I know that it's an *abomination*! Something God never, never, planned for us!"

"We have long turned away from God," said Samyaza, but it was not an argument, the taste of each word like lament. "Since we came here, Azazel, since we married." He began to walk, walk further away from Azazel — the sound of dirt crunching beneath his feet — before he added, "Since I had my woman and you had your man."

Azazel felt the contortion of his face, the grimace, as the sharp breaths of realization befell the other angels, but he remained still. Biting the inside of his cheeks, Azazel raised his chin and let his gaze linger on the leader of the Watchers. Their expressions met, as if they never had, every part of each other stiffened like they had encountered a frightening stranger; all the other Watchers were between them, and there was also a monster, still curled there. Not long ago, it had eaten a man, and it had eaten a woman, along with another man and young woman. "Don't," Azazel whispered, "speak of my man."

"His name is Eitan," said Samyaza. "He's the leader of the hunters." Azazel parted his lips, but Samyaza spoke once more, "You're only berating us because you have no woman to give you a child. You sided with God's foulest creation and now He is having mercy on you. You don't know what this is like—" An unsteady wobble of words, then a breathless laugh, and all this unnecessary blinking. "To have brought into the world a monster—" 'I do know,' Azazel thought, 'I do know.' "Our own flesh begot a monster... How can this be? I don't want to believe it."

"God's wrath," answered Azazel.

"God's wrath," echoed the leader. "And we angels are powerless.

Even if— Oh, Azazel, none of us here are *dull*! I knew from the moment I saw my child that there was something wrong with it, but I thought, I think we all thought, if we raised it well, if...”

Azazel allowed for the words to trail before he responded, slowly: “We angels couldn’t even save another angel.” He was thinking of Eitan, now that he was mentioned, and he was thinking of hunting with the men and how he had lifted a hand and told them, ‘This! This is how Lucifer fell! Let me tell you the story of the devil! I knew him. His heart was full of pride, and his face was full of beauty, and God loved him. God loved him too, too, much.’ “We can’t wage a war on God and win.” “We saw him fall before our very eyes. Lucifer, so short-sided, so young even at a hundred million years of age — thinking he could kill God and take His skin, wear it as a cape.”

“Then what do you suggest?” called out one of the Watchers. “You want us to kill our children, and then what?” It was the angel of the monster, who now laid his hands on his knees, reeled up his body, and looked warily at Samyaza as he stood. “What do we do?” There were hints of anger in his words, but the base of it was miserable, frightened. “What could we do now?!”

“Repent.”

They all turned — each one of the angels — in the direction of the village, where an elderly man lugged along, a few other humans trailing behind him, and though he didn’t cover his face, it took a handful of heartbeats for Samyaza to recognize the furious wrinkles. He opened his mouth again, but it was Azazel who addressed him, “Enoch.” Samyaza felt Azazel move to stand at his side.

But Enoch spared Azazel no glance, staring at Samyaza as he answered, “I warned you. I warned you all. You didn’t listen to me. You thought,” and he stepped closer, slow, “that because you are so old, you know more than me?” Samyaza now regretted those words; he knew the moment they left his mouth that they were wrong, but he had been caught up in his anger, had used a parameter of wisdom for humans that didn’t translate. “Now I see that for all the thousands, millions, of years you angels have lived before us — you are like infants. You know less than our children. And I see—” The old man leaned toward Samyaza, raising himself onto his toes to try and reach his face, and the

angel braced himself to be spit on. “It’s all so clear to me now why the Lord created man.”

“Enoch, you know nothing,” Azazel said, stepping closer, almost as if to get in between Enoch and Samyaza. “Don’t you even imply—”

“You angels all must make it up now.” Enoch inched back, flickered his gaze to Azazel but didn’t directly address him. “All of you. Every human death you have caused. I see now, too, that all of human suffering is because of what you angels have done. Since you arrived, since the *Garden*.” He snarled this, but the spit splattered onto the ground. “The devil is an angel.” He turned at the couple humans who were near, many of them younger — they must’ve been his great-great-grandchildren — holding onto their clothes and onto each other. “Every word I say is the truth!” His yelling was drawing a few more humans closer, and all the more were peering over, some still grieving, watching him. “*The devil is an angel!* The demons are the angels who left Heaven before these here that you see!” He threw his arms into the air, walking backward and gesturing at all the Watchers. “And, soon, all these angels will morph into the demons that have terrorized us since Adam and Eve! The monsters they have forced onto our women are just a hint of what lies beneath! They are monsters beneath their beauty! It is all a lie! All of them — monsters!”

At this, Samyaza felt fury startle in him. He stepped forward, reaching out to grab the elder, “We forced ourselves on no one!”

“You raped our women after you saw how beautiful they were! And now look at what you’ve done!” Enoch narrowed his eyes up at the angel, barely managing to step away from his grip. “I know. I know everything now. I saw an angel in a dream.” He shouted out louder, an incoherent noise that was calling more and more humans to turn their heads, to step closer, and it was like when the Watchers had first arrived, had stepped out from the trees and been greeted the anxious stares of these animals. “The angel came to me and said that God has declared war.”

“War?” whispered the Watcher parent of the monster still among them. “The Lord has declared.... a war on us all?” He staggered closer, so close Samyaza stepped away, thinking this angel was going to grab Enoch for himself. “Is this the truth?”

“It can’t be—” Samyaza began.

“The angel said that He will bring blood vengeance on us all because of what you have done.” Enoch’s chest stuttered with the heaves that were overtaking him. “We will all suffer because of you angels. Your children will grow into giant beasts that will devour us all if something isn’t done!”

“Please,” said the angel, and then he stumbled, hard, onto his knees, jarringly enough that everyone, even Enoch, jolted. “Man. I beg you. Speak to the Lord on our behalf.” Samyaza wanted to argue, but he saw the desperation in his eyes, and then he heard another angel rush closer and say something so similar: “Enoch, you must help us.” Shaking his head, Samyaza wanted to run away from this all. “If He will not listen to us, then He will listen to His man. Please.” Already, there were beads of wet at the begging angel’s eyelashes, interweaving into tears that slipped past the ends of his eyes. “Tell Him that we are sorry.”

Azazel stepped back at this, watching as another one of his brothers hurried to throw himself at Enoch’s feet, hands on the ground, head lowered as he said, “Man, we implore you. Tell Him to save us and to save our families too. Our wives and our children did nothing wrong.” He turned his head away, and he saw now all of the angels rushing to Enoch, wailing almost like children to a parent, begging him to tell God that they had meant no harm, they had simply loved; and Azazel saw that Samyaza, too, was creeping toward Enoch. ‘No,’ he wanted to tell him, ‘Samyaza, hold strong. Hold strong!’

“Tell the Lord,” Samyaza surrendered, “that He has forgiven the angels once.” ‘No!’ Azazel wanted to cry. “There is still mercy in Him. I know that there is.” ‘There is none! There never has been, Samyaza!’ “Tell God that His angels want to confess once more. We will worship Him and make everything right. All we ask is for Him to save our wives, and even husbands—” ‘I never asked to be saved! I haven’t wanted to be saved in a million years! I won’t let God save my husband!’ But Samyaza soon fell to one knee before Enoch, bowing his head. “Please do this for us.” Enoch stared, bewilderment in his rapid blinking until there was a sudden tugging on his mouth, a glint in his eyes — arrogance.

Azazel realized that he was the only angel still standing — all the

others had crumbled to cry and beg, whereas he stood tall, staring at Samyaza and wanting to take him by the hair and wrench him upward again and say, ‘You bow for a man proudly? You, who paired yourself with a woman to save her from man?’ But he clenched his teeth, raised his gaze to Enoch as the old man looked back at him and said, “One of you remains standing.”

Samyaza remained on the ground as he muttered, “Azazel, please. Don’t do this. Not now.”

Azazel exhaled slow, through his nostrils, and he stepped forward, moved onto his knees, and said, “All of us ask for forgiveness.” ‘My knees had been on the ground the same as this when I was dragged to Him; Samyaza, you had been at my side. You had made me apologize then too.’ He felt his angry gaze drift to the leader of the Watchers, and then he thought, ‘I was frightened then, of God’s wrath. But I’m not, this second time. You, Samyaza, this is your first time. On the second, you’ll lose the fear too.’ Azazel felt to be old again; he hadn’t felt this since before the war. ‘And the third time? I wonder what I will feel then. Will I be angrier? I think I will be.’ He shut his eyes, and he could almost feel Samyaza’s fear, as if it were his own heart bruising his lungs and ribs in a frantic dance ‘The rage of God is contagious.’

Enoch said, “I will speak to the Lord. I will make it all right again.”

Samyaza whispered, “And if one must be punished, let it be me.”

Without responding, the elder left them. He listened to the weeping angels as he did, the one responsible for the beast’s rampage being held by a friend — who pulled him close to his chest, kissed his cheekbone, told him that he was still kind, that it was not his fault. ‘It is,’ Enoch knew. As he thought this, Enoch walked past many huts and some of the humans who gathered to hear his yelling, but he met none of their eyes, not even his son Methuselah or his grandson Lamech or his great-grandson Noah. Instead, he kept his gaze on Mount Hermon.

Once, as a child, he said the mountain was like a god, and his grandfather Kenan scolded him for making a deity out of stone, for worshiping things rather than God, and that it was because of this that humans now suffered. Eve was led astray by a fruit, and Enoch’s family would not let their son be allured by something as mundane as rocks that are marvelously tall, or even the towering trees that he now saw

himself approaching. The calls of the creatures beckoned him closer; God's creation with open arms and prey hanging from their mouths like the monstrous creation of angels behind him. Enoch had seen the destruction in the wake of the giant, though he hadn't seen what it had done — only broken huts remained and some specs of human meat.

But all violence is quite interchangeable. He had seen sickness, murder, and rape — and that was all the extent of wickedness in the world. He was certain of it.

When Enoch saw an angel standing amid the trees with his hands interlocked and a scarf of lace over his midnight-dark hair, he stopped. It was the angel of his dreams, though he wasn't alone; on higher ground behind him, there were thirteen other angels, twelve armored in silver so bright that, were it not for the crowded tree canopy above, the sun reflecting off them might have blinded the old man once more. The unarmored angel was tall, dark-skinned, with two braids cascading from a crown his hair had been arranged into, and his eyes were perfectly red, like blood, like a human turned inside out. Enoch had never seen an angel bleed. Did they bleed? Did they feel?

"This is the archangel Uriel," said the angel of his dream. "He will guide you up into the stars." Uriel didn't move, and though Enoch approached him hastily, one of the armored angels stepped forward and reached for the enormous, golden sword hilt beside his head in a swift threat that made the elder stop immediately. Now, the angel of his dream said, "That is Michael. He will remain here."

The face of Heaven's prince was shrouded still by his helmet, though Enoch felt the glare settled onto him regardless and whispered, "I was told by those other angels to speak to God."

Uriel spoke this time: "We know. The Lord said this would occur."

"Blessed be His name," Enoch prayed, lowering his head at evidence of his God's omnipotence. "Blessed be."

Michael's mouth twitched, and he took a step aside, lowering his arm to gesture for eleven armored angels to follow. The grass cried beneath his feet before Uriel addressed him, flatly: "Michael." The prince stopped. "Do not disobey our Father."

"I will not."

"You will do as He told you." There was a deep, venomous resentment in Uriel's words. "Do not dare allow the devil to tempt you."

"There is nothing he can tempt me with." The chief prince clenched his jaw and began moving again, listening to his angels behind him, Phanuel the closest, all following in silence.

He heard Uriel's voice: "Man, I will lead you through each one of the heavens. "I will show you the place of suffering for the angels, and I will show you the place of suffering for the stars. And, then, I will show you the place where all you humans will suffer unless you are saved."

"I want to be saved," said Enoch as the angel of his dreams stepped up behind him. He took him by his underarms and whispered for him not to move so much. Enoch asked if he would die, but he received no answer.

Michael moved between the unfamiliar trees, the strange Earth breeze wispig some loose curls of his hair at the nape of his neck. Uriel and Dina would carry Enoch to God behind him, but he was not a human so he didn't concern himself with what might become of either the elder or mankind from this. His heart was lodged in his throat, his head felt heavy with the image of God's face. Some light streamed in various rivers of sun onto his armor, and he thought of the flames of eternal damnation. He thought of God again. He said His name again. The Lord had burnt a command onto his very soul, and Michael was raw still, the pain so great that it had numbed. His soul was bleak, shallow thin; he was so angry that he felt nothing.

Earth. Earth and the devil. He had been on Earth with the devil once, very long ago. Here they were again.

Violently, he shuddered; he tried to recall the Lord again, his loving Father. But —

'Lucifer,' Michael thought.

SECOND INTERLUDE



He dreamt:

That Lucifer had been made for him; that God had plucked from His garden some lilies and skinned them of green, brought His hand down onto the petals until they smoothed and, at His touch, become castings of golden threads; and that the Lord had set an angel of beauty before the prince of Heaven and said this was a gift. And Michael had stepped forward to see now an angel on a bed of flowers, looking not at the prince but at every petal, touching them, familiarizing with how the flesh of his skin had been before he was malformed by the Creator of all things.

When Michael reached him, he'd taken the chin of the most beautiful angel and lifted it to stare into the twin suns cradled by lashes, like the legs of a spider. A pair of lips parted, and Lucifer said he did not want him. He hadn't known his own name — this new angel — but he'd known what he wanted. Lucifer had then lifted a hand, each one of his fingers landing on Michael's arm like trickle, only for his head to vigorously whip from side to side, his feet moving beneath him, away. The archangel did not chase, staring curiously at his gift and listening to the rustle of trees as angels hurried out from between the branches, between the barks, toward the started Lucifer. To coddle him, to reassure him that this was surely where he belonged, to begin yanking on

him, his hair, his arms, his very nakedness. Toward the grooves, they dragged him, a quivering in Lucifer's voice asking why they took him, the many voices of the angels saying — to prepare you for what you have been made for.

In the wake, Michael had remained beside God, and he'd turned to ask, "Why have you made me an angel?"

And the Lord had said, "You are alone, and it is not right for an angel to be alone."

"Are you not also alone, Father?"

But once they'd prepared the angel for him, the prince turned his wings on God, every feather of deep brown on brown like Earth scalped of green. And he'd made his way past the tree with the most swollen, perilously hanging fruits of good and of evil to see that the other angels had now planted Lucifer but not on the ground where he belonged — rather on his back over a limestone altar not high enough to miss the fingers of the tallest grass. Too, they had dressed him, though immodestly — in an embroidered tunic and in every precious stone: jasper, sapphire, then chalcedony, emerald, and sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, and topaz, chrysoprase, jacinth, and, finally, amethyst. He was so adorned that even his face was draped in jewels, as well as crushed around his open thighs.

They must've prepared him with honey — or maybe it was the nectar from Lucifer's days as a flower. As Michael approached — there had been silver armor on him — he undressed, and with a finger, he reached to touch the leaking, and Lucifer had stared at him, one hand over his abdomen. When a sigh slipped past his rose lips, it was not at Michael's prodding index but at the prince's cool, ruby ring that brushed the skin nearby, the adjunct of the opening, a warmth that the prince remembered feeling once before — in the flames of his immaculate conception. He pulled free, watched his finger drip.

He'd been sure God watched; He'd always had. But Michael introduced himself, his name, his pulsing heart shaped like a lifted hardness. At the same time, he'd taken Lucifer's left hip and tugged him close so that the end of him was off the altar. If Michael released his hold, Lucifer would fall — but, here, he did not. Michael lingered the tip of a pistil in a flower, flower in a flower, lifting his gaze to the angel who had

been made for him, who had now been convinced by everyone in paradise that he was.

With one hand, Lucifer had threaded fingers in his own golden hair, while the other reached for one of Michael's tensed-coiled shoulders. Staring at him, whispering to him, Lucifer said he would learn to be happy here. But now Michael was hesitating, and he glanced downward to see that he had hardly entered the burrow where he was meant to plant himself. He hadn't wanted to venture any further, feared he would lose himself inside, but Lucifer was then twiddling at his dark hair, like he would take Michael's curls and his own wisps to braid together, then would braid their flesh together — Lucifer's flower-flesh and Michael's earth-flesh, and they would never come apart even if Lucifer had once said he hadn't wanted this. Now the chief prince was the soul that needed convincing.

Lucifer had seized Michael's hips and begun tugging in need — "I was made for you," leaving his mouth, "every petal of me arranged for you to pluck." Uncertain, uneven ruts — but amid, there was a happy cry, there was gripping, arching, twisting of a body that might unfurl back into the lily it had once been. The senseless rocking, the sound of two skins meeting, except it hadn't felt quite right inside, and the prince curled forward. Maybe it was really him who was made for Lucifer, had been waiting in chains for this release, but he'd run from one cage to another. Lucifer's hold was so tight that he must've winded his roots around Michael to choke him of life. To spit it out, suck it out like wet, pouted lips drawing air in deep.

Michael — groaning, taking Lucifer's fluttering throat to hold him there on that marital altar, that tombstone — working the tidal roll of his own hips. Like sea, too, he'd begun to drip, but he did not stop his battering; the angel begging for purpose shivered right for him, brought his nails to Michael's back, gripped his wings. Pulling, as if to rip free and into his welcome warmth. Spill, so thick it could have been blood, into a mouth. Like an overwatered plant, dribbling out what it couldn't eat.

But it had been all wrong, all a nightmare. Lucifer — wingless, smiling and touching Michael's face, thanking him. Michael — shaking his head, asking for the earlier hesitance. Where had it gone?

Lucifer hadn't wanted this. What had they done to Lucifer? Not listening, the beautiful angel replied that he was happy to belong to the prince. I love you, he was saying, no one will ever hurt me like you have.

Michael had then removed himself, returning to limpness, piercing coldness setting every point on his skin aflame. Muffled, he could hear the rage of God — leaking into this pathetic dreaming of his, discolored at the edges. In a shaking desperation, he swore to the dazed, unfinished angel:

“I dreamed of you, of loving you.”

“How did you love me?”

“Not like this.”

When the Lord's voice had boomed so loud that He must've been in the trees behind, the archangel turned his head to face Him, but there was no God, nor trees, nor anything but the empty dark of all the days before Heaven, before stars, before time. And he looked back to the angel he'd been gifted, but there was only a desolate stone altar in his place, and so Michael stumbled backward, touching his too-heavy body, frantic, and looking in every direction for where the most beautiful angel had gone.

On the horizon, Michael found him — angel Lucifer running toward a sea out of Eden, his hair strummed by wind, his jewelry rattling like chimes. The chief archangel, soon, was hearing the Lord approach again, cratering footsteps, hissing breathes of fire — and he shouted for Lucifer to run, to run as fast as he could, to run from this place forever. Lucifer did run; he sprinted on the water until he reached a sharp fall, then disappeared past it. His touch, his taste, his scent lingered, ghosted on every trickle of life, ever more so on the archangel's dead desire. And God and Michael never saw Lucifer ever again.

PART III
FLOOD



CHAPTER 29



“**T**hen! Uriel and the other angel lifted Enoch into the sky, through the clouds, into that special crevice where all of Heaven is hiding.”

When the devil paused for dramatic effect, the forty demons all circled about his throne, sitting and holding one another, some even eating, leaned closer — the story captivating them so well that, almost instantaneously, one called out, “Then what, Lucifer? Did God let that man into Heaven?”

“Oh, He did,” Satan sighed, slow and wispy, one of his hands working through the fur of a purring young leopard, whose head was perched on his lap. By his golden hair — a snake hovered, its body coiled about the peak of the throne, flicking its tongue in between Satan’s words occasionally. “Enoch walked the gilded streets, demons. The angels were made to bow before him.” At this, the audience booed, flogging their hands against the air and gagging. “But he wasn’t there long. Uriel and the other angel brought him up further. They passed through the planets, up into the stars, and the archangel waved his hand and he said—” Satan gestured with his own and continued in a deep, cold mimic of Uriel’s voice. ““Man, this is where all the stars have been punished for eternity.””

A demon cackled, one of his arms slung over the chest of a friend,

whereas his other was preoccupied with the bone he was picking at his sharpened teeth with. “Did Enoch see God, Lucifer?”

“He did,” replied Lucifer. “That man arrived at God’s very house, and He welcomed him in, and they sat. God told him that the giants are an abomination, that they are the result of His creation turned corrupted, but He will not allow it. Any creation not made with His blessing will suffer a fate worse than death or even damnation! And poor Enoch, there, shivered and asked what there was to do. God gave Enoch some orders before Uriel” — Lucifer’s mocking voice of the archangel returned — “said, ‘I will take you back to your people. And you will tell the Watchers this. The Lord our God has given the Watchers enough warnings, and now all of life will suffer because of what they have done.’ Gabriel was there too.” Once again, Lucifer mimicked the voice of an angel. “He said, ‘Lord, please, innocent people will be hurt!’ He was even crying.”

“Gabriel begged something of the Lord?” one demon asked.

“That he did!” Satan smiled just as there was some noise outside of his theater, the clamor of shouts and heavy thumps of feet. “But Gabriel cowered when God’s angry eyes landed on him. He apologized. God said, ‘Gabriel, you are the one responsible for this.’ And Gabriel shook his head and cried some more.” Cackling now, Satan flicked an arm through the air. “Uriel returned Enoch to Earth, and it was a few days since he left, but one angel caught him, and then suddenly all the Watchers ran out to see him.”

“What did Enoch tell them, Lucifer?”

“Enoch told them what God told him, that He has run out of mercy and that there is nothing to be done now. That He will make of their children rivers of blood, and He will slaughter their wives. And at this, you see, the Watchers were furious. They began to scream, and one even took a rock. But, then, Uriel appeared again, hovering above, and the Watchers turned their attention to him. They shouted at him while Enoch turned and ran, and though Samyaza, the leader, tried to chase after the man, Uriel shouted out that Samyaza had done enough of angering God, and if he had any self-preservation, then he better step back. Samyaza did, and with this, Uriel left with Enoch to the sky again. The Watchers had nothing else to do but be angry, so angry that

they cried. They knew now that their sin was not going to be forgiven.”

One of the demons scooted closer to Satan’s feet, asking rather feebly, “But what now? What are the Watchers going to do?”

The devil smiled, but he didn’t speak, instead allowing his hand to drift away from the fur that he’d been petting, seconds before the leopard stirred and stalked backward. “Hm.” He breathed a long sigh, a sweet smile curling his lip just as the largest double doors opened loud, streaming in some of the light of the corridor torches and the shadows of those who were standing in between them and the theater.

A silver mountain of an angel was the first to step inside, moving slow as if the weight of the armor pulled down on his body ferociously, but the only winged demon stepped quickly past him, calling, “Satan! I found him for you!” Behind Baal and Michael, still — eleven other angels, five other demons — the host of God as armored as their prince and brandishing their swords, whereas those of the devil wore little more than their capes, their tunics, their jewels. Satan had told them there wouldn’t be any fighting, and to look pleasant, for they had company. And Michael’s helmet, once again, shielded his eyes, but all the demons in the room could feel the pierce of his gaze — or at least Baal, who was grumbling, rolling his shoulders, shifting from foot to foot, could. He tilted his head away from the archangel, as if not seeing Michael would be enough to convince him that he wasn’t there at all. “He was in the forest.”

“How did you know—” Michael’s voice, deep and scratching “— that we were coming?” He had asked the same when Baal dropped, heavily, from between some branches, amid the angels’ discussion. Michael had reached back for his sword, grabbed the hilt tight, shouted out, before Baal had lifted both clawed hands, his eyebrows furrowed, and announced that he’d been sent by Satan to look for him. Soon thereafter, the other demons began poking their heads from behind nearby trees, some laughing, all of their faces contorted in amusement — except for Baal, whose mouth was twisted in a tight scowl.

“I know most things,” said the devil. “I’m like God, after all.” At Michael’s side, the angel Phanuel touched his cape, ever delicately, but Michael only breathed out through his nose, unable to discern what-

ever his friend might mean to say. “I see you brought more friends with you this time.” Did he recognize him? Perhaps not. How many could he have killed, by now? How many hearts had he devoured?

‘There is nothing left of you,’ the chief prince thought, seeing the devil, as beautiful as Heaven. Eyes the gold of the streets, lips as shaped as every flower in every garden. ‘You are just a memory.’ He opened his mouth and replied, “Why have you lured us angels here?”

“I can’t invite old friends to my home?”

“You are no old friend.”

“What were we then, Michael?” Delicately, the devil tilted his head, a smile grazing those pink, pretty lips, and the demons all still gathered by his feet laughed.

Baal was the one who responded, speaking stiffly, not looking at the prince: “Michael wasn’t very cooperative coming here. He said he’d butcher me if this was a trick.”

“Of course he did.” Satan stood, slow, then stepped forward onto the steps leading down from his throne, down the theater. “Michael only knows how to listen to God.” His leopards had begun to wander, hopping onto ledges on the walls, creeping toward the other end of the room and compelling the angels to inch forward, away from the door, toward the center. “He’s never known to think.” And his snake was trailing behind him, so close that it may as well have been a tail to his tunic.

His tunic — it was long, sweeping by his ankles, and the material was thick cotton, crushed by the golden belt on his waist, jeweled and flashing every color as the torchlight streaked over him. Draping, the top half ran diagonally across from one shoulder to expose half his chest and the pretty brown nub pierced by a golden, tiny barbell, with miniature stars dangling from it. ‘Beast.’ By Satan’s sternum, too, a few necklaces swept by, some golden, some silver, jades, and sapphires working in tandem, some ruby, emeralds. His earrings also jangled, right along with his tussles of flaxen hair, falling in a filigree joining of silver and beads. On his wrists, there was more excessive shining, the same as on his ankles. He could have been any youthful angel from before the war for Heaven, in so much jewelry you lost him beneath, but their cling on Satan’s body seemed quite purposeful, more mature.

All this — framed by the great crown on his head that protruded four horns, like the four cherub wings the prince could still feel the blood of, dried and cracked, on his hands.

Michael hadn't felt his legs moving, but he was suddenly seeing the face of the devil, just as perfectly shaped up close as it seemed from afar. 'Father's work.' But he tilted his head, and he saw something else. "Devil." Tinges of red, rot caving into itself as it withered: death beneath Satan's beauty, in the crevices of his eyes, in his shadow. His snake moved tidally among that same dark. "Tell me what it is you want."

"You came here to wage war." Angel and demon stared at one another — eyes of gold meeting golden slits on a helmet. "On man and on the Watchers. But what do you know of war, Michael? You know nothing. And of Earth you know even less. I've told you this before."

Michael spat out the words — "There is nothing you and your demons can offer us that God cannot provide." He knew that same Lord must've led him here, to speak to Lucifer once more, but that knowing didn't quench a fiery frustration in his skull.

Instantly, Baal stepped to Satan's side but lingered between the two as a guttural, rumbling noise built from his throat, a warning that stirred many of the other demons by Lucifer's throne to finally climb onto their feet, flicking their tails, abandoning their food and removing their hands from one another. At the same time, the angels behind Michael drifted their hands to their weapons.

"I told you this, too, Michael," said Satan, lip curling back, revealing perfect teeth, a perfect smile. "In the house of the devil, the devil is your god." A giggle drifted from him. "And you are powerless."

Low and flat — "You're a beast."

"And you're a God-damned monster," replied Satan, stepping backward, his voice coming breathier, "here to wage war on my precious Earth." He raised his chin, humor melting into an anger nearly lost in his regal authority. "Come then. Follow me." He reached, removed his crown, then handed it to Baal without looking at him. "I'll bring just six of my demons. Baal, you'll be searching for rooms for the angels to sleep while they live here among our own."

Michael didn't move. "Why are you doing this?"

Satan laughed. “You poor, wretched thing.” Then, he brushed past him. “You think I don’t know?” Michael’s fingers twitched, hungry to grab, grab his sword, reach out, and grab the devil by the throat just as he passed by. “I told you — I know everything.” To feel his pulse drumming his fingers, a tiny rhythm, little song of life. ‘But there’s no pulse in you. You’re dead. You’ve been dead for longer than you ever lived.’ Michael made a noise, gruff, when he was touched by Phanuel again, on his arm this time. “I wasn’t going to wait on you, angel. I’ve learned never to wait on a coward.”

And he took him; the devil led him back out of the demon caves, out into the brisk air, the low-hanging clouds, nearly fog but not, where the air grew thicker, palpably wet on his brow, his lips. Michael’s tongue darted outward, dragged against his mouth, and he glanced backward to see his angels following, along with the other demons. Baal was stationed far behind, by the rocks still. Michael barely caught sight of him, or it would have been *barely* if Baal were not big-horned and overly large in his build — biceps and legs, in particular. Too much muscle, perhaps torn from dead things and stuffed into him until the threat of tearing at the seams. But, soon, Baal was disappearing among the building, crowding forestry, was just a memory.

Michael turned his head, saw Satan, felt the weight of the sword on his back and the chains draped across his chestplate. Lucifer — ‘just a memory’ — walking ahead, and Phanuel so near to him. He stared at the blonde hair cascading past Satan’s shoulders, falling like tassels might from a cape, and he swallowed, so hard his saliva was certainly a shard, cutting him down to his stomach. ‘Lucifer, ahead of me, turning back, smiling brightly beneath the glow of Heaven, all of his hair melting into the brilliance, his laughter brilliant, his hand on mine, the tugging. Come, dance with me, he said.’ No one spoke as they marched. ‘Lucifer. Clawing at the air, reaching out and screaming out my name with so much anger it was setting you aflame, and between your lips, you were spewing out all the molten rock of the Earth.’

They continued, continued walking. Before long, the sun was leaving them and the trees were cooing with a new fervor of buzzing and bristling. As if to calm it, Satan reached out before them and grazed his hand on a branch. It was this that he did seconds before they

managed to step out onto flatter land, less populated by bark or its leaves. A small cluster of a dozen cottages was up ahead, but it was not Enoch's people — for they were at the other side of Mount Hermon's jagged range. And these humans had pointed straw roofs, their house floors made of stone mounted on wooden pegs.

Satan began toward them, as one angel by Michael's side called out, "Devil, what are you doing? They'll see us."

"Oh," laughed Satan. "You don't need to worry. This tribe here lives in small, separate family villages. If a Watcher is hiding among them, it'll only be one or two."

"But why," called another angel, "are you making us walk up to them?"

Satan didn't reply, and Michael knew better than to ask.

When the humans saw them, they startled, but they didn't run, except for one mother with her child, and a boy and his dog. Instead, many approached with a little curiosity; Michael hadn't attacked these humans the last time he was here. There was, also, a bonfire at the center of the huts — a collection of logs over plain dirt, circled by pebbles. The fire itself was weak, crackling and barely illuminating the center of the settlement as the sun kept, kept, dipping into the mountain horizon. It was here, finally, that Satan stopped, turning around swiftly and outstretching his arms. "Humans, gather, gather!"

"Devil!" hissed out an older woman, a younger boy pulling at her arm, but she didn't move away, and the humans began to circle, no angels already among them.

"Oh, how lucky we are," Satan teased. "Not any of those whore Watchers here. You would think God is on our side." Turning his head at the angels and demons once more — "Have any of you brought your instruments? If not, there are a few scattered around here." He gestured, and there were a couple animal-skin drums, sapling sticks, and flutes made of bone and ivory — nestled by the rocks. "Take them."

"Satan," Michael said, each syllable harsh, his eyes narrowing by instinct. "Enough of this—"

A baby had begun to wail, right nearby, followed by the coos of the young mother, who rocked the bundled infant in her arms, whispering

incomprehensibly, but Satan stepped toward her, snatched the child. Instantly, she gasped and tried reaching for him but the devil skipped away from her, laughing and shouting out, “Be afraid! All of you, humans, be afraid!” He hugged the child to his chest, still babbling and whining, as Michael stepped forward threateningly, shoulders tensed, prepared to reach for his sword. “There are giants that live among you now! You’ve seen them in your own tribe! Because of those deplorable angels, making whores out of your women! They’ve damned you all to be eaten by their children!” He rocked the child now, and though it twisted its head, its wails softened. “Be afraid, all of you, of the day the giants come to eat your children, right before your very eyes!”

The humans looked about themselves, fathers and mothers glancing at their children, whereas the children looked to Satan like he was the most beautiful creature that roamed the Earth; he was.

“What will you do? Will you all sit and wait for that day?” The devil sighed it out, beginning to move, to stalk around the fire. “In the time that it takes for you to decide, ‘Will we turn on our fellow man? Won’t we?’ — it’ll be too late. You’ll be bile in a monster’s mouth. Your daughters in the bellies of the beasts, your sons catching in their throats!”

“What is this?” Michael turned his head, saw all the humans now stepping closer, eyes growing wide, wider, becoming dark holes about to devour the angels and demons before them. ‘Are you tempting them?’ He swallowed, and he caught, from his peripheral, some of the angels reaching for the instruments, touching them — remembering, perhaps, how they had once played on the streets of Heaven, had filled every pinch of the sky with song. ‘A memory.’

“You will die afraid because you never learned the courage to fight!” The devil turned his attention to the infant in his arms, calm now, blinking its beady dark eyes at lovely Satan. “There is no time left. None at all.” He extended his arms, offering the bundled infant back to the shocked mother. “Take your weapons now.” The angels fingered the instruments as some of the men looked toward their spears, a few younger ones already running for them. “Burn your homes and fight this war! Or stay where you stand and fall dead!” The woman took the child, and she stepped back, sunk into the sea of humans growing

louder, rising and asking what now, where to. But the devil turned to Michael, stepped toward him, smiling so wide he might grab the world at its ends and yank it free of its chains. Satan whispered, “Sing for them.” Michael didn’t turn his head, didn’t look to Lucifer. He watched upheaval, fear spreading like the fog that had come down onto them all, suffocating them in haze and blindness.

“Sing?”

“Sing. I taught you how. Do you remember?”

The demons were the first to begin, to sound the bone flutes, their mouths pulled into wicked grins. And Michael stared at those humans who were eyeing him frightfully, holding tight either children or obsidian machetes. Once again, he swallowed, and he reached back for his sword, at last, feeling the hilt scorching against his palm — pulling it over his head, like a crown. ‘I do remember. I remember him. Lucifer.’ His voice came forth, rough at its edges, deeper and bristled in its song: “That day when freed from sinning, I shall see Thy lovely face.” He moved and, outstretching his sword, allowed the ends of the bonfire to graze it, igniting the very tip. “Clothed, then, in blood and now at the beginning.”

The angels thudded their hands against drums, stepping back, swaying with each beat from one foot to the other, singing back, “Sing, sing, prince, of Thy sovereign grace!”

“Teach me some melodious sonnet.” Michael approached a young man, cowering and staggering backward. “Sung by flaming tongues far above.” *Ta!* — a beat of the drums, then — *ah!* — the cry of the human as the angel swung out his weapon, struck against his head, tore a face aflame. Crimson splattering in a sprawl — onto the chief prince and the devil beside him in the dark. “Praise the mouth, your host fixed upon it!” And the humans knew now that there was no choice but war, and the last who hadn’t yet done so ran for their weapons, gripped them tight, shouted for everyone to follow, even the elders and children. “Mount of Thy redeeming love.”

“This—” laughed Satan. “Now, this is war!”

“Sing, sing, prince, of Thy sovereign grace!”

Shrieking, some humans flung themselves to hide, others crouched, but the bonfire was coming apart at the hands of God’s messengers,

picked and thrown at the huts. These angels were now razing them, killing them, but some men began to sing along, the music in their throats, their hearts, their eyes. Religious fervor so alive even the women joined to pump their fists and bellow cheers amid the screams of the weaker. The baby Satan's touch had blessed fell to a stampeding ground, the cinders began to trickle up the sky.

“Take my ransom soul away;
send the angels now to carry
them to forever, torment days—”

From behind some foliage, the wandering Naamah watched a human thrash as angels took his limbs and pulled until he tore — then they turned and ran.

CHAPTER 30



One of Enoch's great-grandchildren, Noah, had a teenage son who'd split his head on a rock, but his mind hadn't fully leaked out, so all he'd done was twitch and gurgle in a slow pain of blood filling his mouth, his eyes. His father, horrified, had sprinted for Samyaza and said, "We are good people. Please do not judge us for how Enoch has treated you. Please help my child. His name is Ham." And Samyaza — Azazel heard — hadn't hesitated, hurrying with Noah to where his child was screaming and weeping like an infant, his two brothers and mother holding him, their hands reddened and dripping as if in water.

Without much of a comment, Azazel had drawn away from this gossiping among the hunters, stepping past some trees, a sigh seeping from his mouth, as he returned to scavaging the area for animals, scaling up the bark with a few helpful flaps of his wings. When he caught birds, insects, spiders, and all other living things, he asked if they knew where there were mammoth animals to eat. "You'll kill them all," replied a bird. "You'll kill them all. The giant animals. You'll kill them all." Azazel told them only God could bring the fist of extinction down on life. "You will kill the giants to feed your giants."

'What other choice do we have?' Azazel climbed back to the ground, breathing soft. 'If we don't feed the monsters, they'll eat the

humans.’ If there was a way to kill them, the angels hadn’t learned how, or they claimed they couldn’t learn how. Behind him, Azazel heard chuckling men and stepped closer to see if they were still speaking about the leader of the Watchers’ healing. ‘I had the thought,’ Azazel mused again, ‘that’s why you men haven’t yet banished us from your land despite Enoch’s words and what our giants have done. If Samyaza is lost, then you will all die easier again. One or two eaten by an angel’s child is surely better than many dozens succumbing to injuries so often.’

Eitan was nodding rather dismissively to what a young man was discussing when Azazel stepped toward him, then he smiled. “Hello, angel. Did the birds tell you where to find something to kill?” Azazel shook his head, solemn, and the groans of the hunters echoed in his ears, but their chief grunted — “All of you, be quiet. We hunted once without the help of an angel, and now you’ve all come to rely on him too much.” He stepped closer to Azazel, laid his hand on his back. “And the sun will set soon. We’ll find better catches tomorrow.”

“We’ll die,” said the young man that Enoch had been dismissing; he fiddled with the end of his spear and stared up at the sky. “We’ll die if we don’t kill something large enough to feed those monsters.” Slow, he tilted his head and stared at Azazel. “Your monsters.”

“Azazel has nothing to do with those beasts,” Eitan snapped. “If you say anything like that again, I’ll knock out the rest of your teeth.”

Breathing, the angel Azazel turned away as the young man said nothing to Eitan, and Azazel decided to say nothing, as well. Maybe the memory of Samyaza’s mass healing of the entire village would grant all the angels some time of relative peace, but the humans were not eternal so their gratitude likely wasn’t either. As they all began to head toward the settlement, Azazel found himself staring at his husband’s face beside him, then wondering if he should have thanked him for defending him, but he really only wanted to go and sleep a while. He was still shaken, of course — had been nothing but shaken since Enoch had announced God’s fury and since the incident with Armoni in this same forest. ‘Where is Armoni?’ He had been missing for too long now.

Eitan shouted for the men to prepare to meet again at dawn, then,

briefly, touched Azazel's arm to urge him to split away from the others, and again, Azazel chose to remain silent. Together, they branched off in the direction of their home, the sun beginning to slant in the sky as the chief of the hunters had predicted, and the angel wasted no time to trek toward the hut, walk past its entrance, then squat by the pit dug into the center, lined with stones, filled with some firewood. Within arms reach, there was a pot of water that was running dangerously low, that Azazel took so that he could heat it, and he and Eitan could wash one another.

Behind, the man was pulling a cotton sheet over the open doorway, quietly saying, "I'm sorry for what the men were saying."

The angel hesitated. "There's no need to apologize."

Eitan stepped closer to him, lowering onto a knee, then leaned to kiss his cheek, murmuring against it, "We have some time alone. Naamah has been out wandering." Azazel's hands lingered over the imagined flames he hadn't yet lit. "Let me put my mouth on you." The angel shuddered, but he didn't push away the lips that moved down onto his neck. "I miss the taste of you."

"It's only been hours." Azazel gingerly touched his husband's cape of animal skin.

"Every second is worse than the last." Eitan planted his hand on Azazel's shoulder, guiding him to lay on the dirt ground before crawling on top of him, pulling up the angel's tunic to his hips, taking one thigh, fingers pressing into that softer, pliable flesh. "You're like what I always wanted this to be like." "This?" The man, swiftly, dipped his head down and planted his wet tongue, and Azazel's breath hitched. "What is this?" But he knew what this was. "You're like a dream." The man, though, inched back away and upward, his beard coming to scratch Azazel's hip before he pressed a kiss there.

The Watchers had promised not to sleep with their wives, but Azazel hadn't dared to offer his own celibacy. It would have reminded him too much of the kneeling he'd done before God, the promise to never touch or be touched again. And yet here he was, being touched by a man wrapping his arms around his body and tugging on him. Here he was, feeling too small and too weak for an angel. Eitan was guiding him toward the bedding — the shuffles of their feet like needles

scratching the drums of Azazel's ears — and then the angel was turned over, bent onto the mat. 'Did you mean to say it feels like a dream to fuck me?'

Azazel turned his head, felt a cheek press against the covers, as the man's hands went up into his hair, tangled in the braids. Eitan was not taking the usual time that he took to lovingly prod and wetten, instead bringing flesh that Azazel thought had hardened too quick to uncere- moniously thump against him. Furrowing his brow, Azazel thought, 'What are you doing? You've never not been tender with me. You haven't kissed my mouth.' Eitan hunched over him, his belly pressing against the angel's back warmly, and Azazel would have adored the feeling in any other circumstance, but his own stomach was clenching. 'What's wrong? Is something wrong with you or with me? You always rolled your hips into me like you're afraid to, teased me from the front.' He gripped the bedsheets and whispered, "Eitan." 'Your cock — you're stabbing me with it like it's a spear.' "Husband," he sighed when there were kisses nipped at the back of his neck, 'Do you want me to bleed?'

When Eitan finally remembered tenderness, it was over; he cleaned Azazel, kissed him, then took him to bed.

And the sun rose another day. Now, Samyaza was sitting beside his eldest, living daughter, an eleven-year-old — both atop a mound where he had once talked with her mother. With a stream of water, he was sewing together the torn open skin of her arm, him working diligently as she looked to her beastly half-sibling — four times her size with all of its legs folded beneath itself as it banged its teeth against some bark. "He's hungry," she said, her voice rather unperturbed. "That's why he attacked me."

"I'm sorry."

"I don't care that much." Her head tilted up at the angel, and she added, "My sister once bit me too." Samyaza didn't ask which sister she referred to; he knew, and if they said her name aloud, he feared it might stir her soul from dead to see how much worse the world had become. "My other brother bit me too." Idly, her feet began to rock from side to side, and she laughed. "It's my fault, through. I like to fight." She leaned closer. "My mother used to get mad a lot before you came. My father too." The leader of the Watchers was soon tying the last of her

wound together, and she was drawing her arm away. "My mother was different before you came down from the sky." She rolled both her arms, as if that would rouse them from slumber, then climbed onto her feet, over the mound, standing tall at Samyaza's side.

"She's different," the angel contended, bringing his hands to the bowl of water he'd been working with — a plain half-sphere of clay.

"She saw him try to eat me," the girl said, crossing her arms, and staring at the beast. "She didn't try to help me. She said it was hungry." The angel grimaced before he could stop himself — all of his face contorting in deep shame, as if his wife's actions were his own actions; 'they are, we've been one with each other since we married and loved.' His daughter turned to him, tilting her head. 'You do still love me, right?' "Angel." Finally, he stood, taking the bowl and spilling the left-over, reddened water into the Earth, hoping it would seep in, travel far, be sipped by some roots. Then, Samyaza turned his attention to his daughter — her thin, small body, the freckled face of her father, her large nose, thick eyebrows. "Ohya," she said.

Samyaza blinked "Ohya?"

"I think that's what we should call him." She nodded her head at the giant, still uselessly chewing at the tree, as if it could find heartier entrails inside if it just pressed deep enough. Samyaza asked what the name meant, and said she didn't know. "My great-grandfather named his wolf that before he died. I don't think anyone knows what it means." Samyaza had never considered that — knowledge lost when the living didn't pass it on. "But it sounds like him."

Samyaza looked at Ohya, who raised its eyes at the same time, and echoed, "Ohya."

They had named the beast now, had made it a living thing now. Samyaza nodded his head, touching the hair of his daughter, telling her to go to Idith's mother and ask if she'd want to spend some time living with her, but the girl said, "No, I want to be with you." She scrunched her nose at him, then put her bare foot on Samyaza's shin in such a light tap that he hadn't realized it was meant to be a kick. "My grandmother is just like my father, you know! I'd rather be with an angel."

Not wanting to argue, Samyaza answered calmly, "Your mother hasn't been well. I don't think you children should be around her right

now.” He remembered how, that night, she had been asking, begging, for him to tell her how he enchants the water to heal. “I think you’d be safer if you stayed with your grandmother for a while.” He began to walk, not too far but keen to create some distance between them and the beast. Even still, he moved slowly, so that she could feel faster by walking ahead of him with her chin raised.

‘Girls have so much confidence,’ Samyaza thought. ‘Where does it go when they become women?’ He supposed he thought he was saving them from men once — when he’d decided to marry Idith, but he was an angel, not God. ‘Only God saves.’ Ahead, he noticed a small gathering of humans by a hut, where a woman was seated on a wooden bench with a newly-born infant in her arms and speaking with the many guests, primarily the women, who chattered with her, whereas the men mostly lingered some steps behind. Samyaza couldn’t help staring at the baby, thinking of his own behind him. He swallowed, then stopped walking, attempting now not to think of children or fucking or Idith’s hands or Idith screaming at him to fuck her.

Samyaza bit his trembling bottom lip, his throat feeling rawer, rawer. He didn’t want to recall it, but his memory refused any benevolence — returning home from Enoch’s warning, frantically trying to speak to her as she’d laid in bed, cradling her giant monster with a wide smile and dazed eyes. ‘Idith?’ She’d said she left the other children with her mother for the night. Samyaza asked what she was talking about; he stepped backward when she left the beast on the mat, then stepped closer. ‘Stop. Idith.’ She took his clothes, yanked on them. ‘I don’t want to.’ He tried to touch her, but she hissed at this, then struck him hard against the chest and said she would die if he didn’t do this. ‘Don’t make me do this.’ She grabbed him by the arm, tugged him closer, saying she would die — how could Samyaza let her die?

But there was a pair of fluttering wings, muted blue, in the crowding — Azazel, standing in the space between the men and the women. And, soon, Samyaza joined him, stepping to his side. “Azazel.” The angel jumped. “Put away your wings. You’re taking up more room than necessary.” It didn’t have the bite it used to — Samyaza’s scolding. “But how are you?” He caught the ruffled feathers just as Azazel, indeed, slipped his wings inside himself again. “Are you alright?”

Azazel nodded his head forward, instead, saying, “That’s the child of my man’s cousin. He has so many cousins that I forgot one was due this morning, but she seems very well. Her grandmother says that she appears to be blessed. But I think his hair is so.... pale, like he’s already elderly.” Samyaza turned his head, and it was so — the bundled infant, in the arms of the mother, the streams of hair too long for a baby, the hair too colorless, like it had all been drained. “My husband whispered to me that the baby frightens him.”

“Everyone,” Samyaza murmured, lower than he’d intended, “is birthing monsters.”

Azazel considered saying something such as, ‘Everything that has ever been birthed has been a monster; we were all birthed from God, the greatest monster of them all,’ but he bit down on his cheeks, listening to the roll of wind. “I suppose I should ask how you are. How your wife is.”

“She is alive,” Samyaza offered because he was not a demon and only demons lied. “I can say that much.” He didn’t say she was likely pregnant again, feared what would become of Azazel’s face. Samyaza couldn’t admit that she had dug her nails into him and ground on him until he laid in surrender. Azazel would snarl that Samyaza was a strong angel; he should have thrown her off. Azazel would not understand. He couldn’t. “And what about your... man?”

“He is alive too,” Azazel replied, turning his head and tilting it at him. “Given the state of things, I suppose we can be thankful enough for that.” His lips twitched. “Even if God weren’t full of rage for us, we would still have to live with this fear of losing them.” Love had been doomed from the start. “I still have the urge in me to be thankful for things. It must be because I’m an angel. Gratitude even when it’s worthless — that’s how I lived through Heaven, even after it became what it is now.” Breathing out through his nose, Samyaza felt his shoulders shake, and the nearby newborn cried out shrilly. “Though sometimes I wonder if I really did live through it.”

Samyaza parted his lips, maybe to spill an apology like it were blood and he was wounded, but the voice of a young girl, his daughter, broke in: “What are you saying?” She stepped between the two angels, turning her head between them. “You angels talk so strange and stiff.”

Before the angel parent could apologize on her behalf, Azazel smiled softly, and he chuckled, “Do we?”

“You do.” She cackled, sounding like her mother. “You talk how I imagine animals to talk.”

Azazel laughed once more, sweeter. “I always thought we were more like plants that talk.” Samyaza stared at them, his daughter and Azazel, smiling at one another. “I love plants. In Heaven, there are so many of them.” The girl scoffed that there were plenty on Earth too. “Yes, but it’s all prettier in Heaven, simpler. I used to lazy around and eat grapes all day once.” He poked her nose with his index. “One day, you will too.” Samyaza felt a terrible warmth in his heart; he didn’t know why, but it rose to his cheeks, and he had to strangle down the smile bubbling along his lips “I’ll take you to our house. Samyaza and I share one. You would fit in very well.”

The girl was laughing, not believing it, but a drift began to sweep over her voice, so sudden that it called Samyaza’s attention back to her. Just as she pointed at the forestry, a small figure rushed out of its sprawl, running so fast and hastily that their arms swung everywhere to keep balance. Their feet twisted, and they doubled over, only to immediately recover and run some more. It was a child — with two braids, a tunic of wool, and bare feet so calloused they may as well have belonged to an elder.

“Naamah,” left the mouth of Azazel, who broke out running with Samyaza’s child at his side, the girl not hesitating to fully sprint toward the heaving, red-faced, gasping Naamah. At the same time, Samyaza whipped his head back and saw the clamor of birth celebration continuing, then hurried off after the other two, following, feet beating on the grass. Before them, Naamah stumbled onto a loose twig and, this time, allowed their body to hit the ground. “Naamah!” Azazel cried out, but the child was shuddering with violent, seizing shakes.

“Azazel—” Naamah’s face was so red that it obscured nearly every feature upon it, though not the lines of dried tears, and that same hue had leaked even into the white of their eyes. “Azazel.” Naamah’s throaty gasps were more like whimpers as they weakly managed to lift their body to sit but remained leaning over.

“What’s wrong?” Azazel asked, falling to his knees, taking Naamah

without hesitation, pulling the child close. "Tell me what happened." Samyaza's daughter soon also dropped to the ground, raising both her hands but doing nothing with them. "What were you running from?"

"Was it—" Samyaza slowed down into a walk, gasping out and stumbling. "Was it a giant? One of the children?"

Naamah didn't answer, looking up at Azazel, then at Samyaza's daughter, blinking at her, then reaching their hand out, slow, tentatively. It was only after the girl took their hand that Naamah breathed, slow, and murmured, "It was the angels." They squeezed the girl's fingers. "And the demons. Both of them. They fought together, and they killed all the humans who didn't grab weapons and march out with them. They killed them like— like animals. I saw all their guts. There was so much blood that all the ground turned red, and I saw one angel spear four humans and leave them skewered—" Naamah didn't finish, rocking forward, a sudden hiccup jerking their body, and Samyaza's daughter, quickly, embraced them.

"War," whispered Azazel. "War. The Lord said he would bring us war."

Samyaza, unseeing, shook his head, taking a step backward. "No. The humans don't know of war. The Lord would not teach man of war."

"War!" Azazel had told the hunters, laughing at their excitement, his face painted beautifully. "I will tell you of war!" And, now, his heart caved into itself.

CHAPTER 31



Kokabiel's tribe was attacked one sunset. He had been playing with his monster child, mostly wrestling with it, then laughing through grit teeth when the giant snapped its jaw down on his braced arms, flat teeth crunching the bones enough the white pierced his brown, freckled skin, and his pink muscle dribbled out in tandem. 'If it weren't for the stars,' he thought with glee, 'I'd let you eat me and see if that would do away with my thinking.' He lifted a foot and planted it square between its six eyes, then he shoved, so hard the giant was thrown back and slammed against the mud wall of the home's interior. As it was kicked away, a high ripping had sounded; a chunk of meat and bone was torn out from Kokabiel, and he gasped out in the pain, hiccuped, then staggered back. But, quickly, he began to wheeze a giggle and touch his twitching, partly severed arm. 'This pain is so great and yet not enough.'

Quietly, the stars spoke to him, and Kokabiel also heard some distant screaming and struggle. Ahead of him, the giant was rolling on its back and gargling on the skin.

Kokabiel turned to a plain, glass-less window, stepped toward it, stuck his head out, then smiled. 'There they are.' A mob of humans running down a hill with torches and stone weapons, far above them an armored angel with a golden chain — Michael. 'There he is. The

prince.' He outstretched his damaged hand, allowing the tip of his pinkie to sink into a bowl of drinking water, felt the snake of cool coil up his arm to begin to heal him. 'That wretched little coward.' Kokabiel was quite good at healing, though he never told anyone but Baraquel. His Baraquel.

Before him, he saw some demons too, the great, mighty bull horns of Baal as he helped a pair of men pull a father out of his house and begin to stomp on him before his shrieking family. The two attacking humans called him a barbarian because he lived differently than they did, with clay homes and thick shawls. The devil must've planted this feeling in them, this sudden rage at insignificant difference. Or perhaps it was Michael, the sword of God.

'I will go and hide my wife,' Kokabiel thought. 'And then I will warn Baraquel.' Glancing to his side, he saw the tears on his arm still stitching together, his injury halfway healed. 'But I can't help but remember the last war I stood in.' In fact, Kokabiel could not remember his life before the war. 'The running amid fires, the beatings in the streets, the name *Lucifer* in shouts of adoring or hate, and my fear so great that I thought it had twisted into a creature inside me, my gut, and was clawing out. Only then I heard a noise like a screech, louder, higher.' Kokabiel had wrenched his arm away from the angel he was with, grappled both sides of his own head, fisting his red hair, and he'd abruptly, agonizingly, screamed. 'Stars, stars, stars — falling into Heaven!' He had attacked the angel at his side, and the angel had run from him.

And quiet Baraquel with white flowers in his hair, even then, had seen a convulsing, screaming angel on the ground; unlike the others, he hurried to Kokabiel, tried to take his body and lift it before he might hurt himself. In Baraquel's arms, Kokabiel had stilled, rasping and choking but he no longer flailed as he had been. His face had turned to the flowered angel, and then he'd surged forward and brushed his lips on his. "Baraquel," Kokabiel had somehow known his name; 'the stars had given it to me.' "Angel of light. You're mine now. You will never part from me. You will never rid of me." And Baraquel had stared at him with frightened, wide eyes, but he did not loosen his hold on him.

“War, then,” Kokabiel sighed wistfully, skipping outside, “and war now.”

A few days later, Azazel followed Eitan, the man holding the angel’s hand, the crackles of bonfire behind as a family prepared to slaughter one of their goats and roast it beneath the afternoon, warm sun. He was feeling fairly energetic, feeling relaxed. It had been a while since then; Eitan had begun wanting to have sex every morning and often every evening. Azazel didn’t mind, at least not theoretically, but he knew this wasn’t how it had been before. That night, Eitan had gnawed at his neck as he rocked deep into him, pinching at his skin too much, bringing a hand to twiddle at Azazel’s chest, something that the angel was still deeply embarrassed to have enjoyed. ‘Sweet angel, you called me.’ Now, all that the shameful Azazel could do was stare at a bleating goat, chewing at the grass by the feet of a father holding a stone machete. For a second, maybe less, the goat flickered its thin, gazing slits at the angel.

Eitan said, “Here, to the left,” and Azazel felt himself tugged away from that too-conscious creature.

“That poor thing,” he murmured, still looking back. “That goat. Before Samyaza sent me to go hunting with all of you men, I would look after the goats.” A slight sigh left Eitan’s mouth, but it didn’t sound like a response and, hesitatingly, Azazel turned his head. A breath drew out from him sharply. “Oh no.” A five-acre, rectangular field of lentils that the humans had a month or two ago planted — and hadn’t yet been ready for harvest but were nonetheless bushy, hearty shrubs — had lost its green to reveal blackened skeletons. “What happened?” The scent of dry burn persisted, hung heavy.

“I heard that some men and a demon with them burnt the field last night.”

Azazel raised some trembling fingers to his lips. “From this tribe?”

“No,” said Eitan. “*Foreigners* of some sort.” The angel had never heard that word, but the man continued: “I’m hearing all kinds of things. One of the men who hunts with us said he left to visit a cousin in another tribe, and he was assaulted by a mob of men. I heard that another tribe was invaded. I heard there were hundreds dead because of that armored archangel and the devil.” Azazel’s blood was falling,

falling out of him, his eyes caught on the all-consuming burned field in confused terror. "I was going to tell Samyaza and Enoch's children too, though I'm sure they might already know." Azazel realized his hand was still being held when Eitan's rough fingers squeezed his own. "But I wanted to tell you first. All of this — it reminds me of what you told us about."

Azazel looked to Eitan slowly, feeling his eyebrows twitch. "What are you referring to?" But he knew.

"War." Eitan drifted his fingers up to his knuckles, his wrist, then arm. "This is war, isn't it?"

Forcing a laugh, the anxious angel tried to say, "I don't know—"

"You said the devil's angels burned all the fields, attacked, went around in mobs." The man now gripped Azazel's wrist. "They were only defeated when God gathered all the angels and made them fight back."

Instantly, Azazel started shaking his head. "No, Eitan."

"We can wage a stronger war on the men attacking the villages, and on the angels, the demons. War on everyone."

Azazel had already noticed how thin Eitan's family was becoming; he could hear them saying that they were growing sicker, watching their bones create deep crevices on their skin. And Azazel had already been saying that the angels were doing what they could, but the earthly harvests were seasonal, and the humans must share their knowledge with the angels, as well, to ensure that there was enough food. Barely, he managed to say, "You don't want to wage war."

"You shared that knowledge with us, Azazel." Eitan turned to him fully. "It's divine. And you're divine. You've trusted me with you, so trust me with this war." "There is nothing," Azazel wanted to say, 'divine about war.' "I love you." Azazel said that he loved him too. "More than anything?" Yes. "More than God?" Azazel blinked, curiously, but if Eitan was joking, his eyes hinted at no humor despite the little laugh he suddenly made. "Let's leave. Maybe you can tell Samyaza with me."

Azazel decided to nod, then released a soft breath when his husband kissed his cheek, his beard scratching in that way he often liked. "Yes. We should do that."

“And on the next hunt — you won’t mind if the men and I ask you some things about war and about how you angels make weapons?”

This time, the angel murmured that he might not mind, but he hoped Eitan reconsidered this idea. And he went off with him to inform Samyaza, who was healing a young boy’s bird and grumbled that he had seen what they had that very night. But, like Azazel, he seemed hesitant to consider some great retaliation on whoever it had been that attacked. Samyaza said, “I’ll speak to Kokabiel. I’ll speak to Danel. The other leaders. I’ll send an angel to Armoni to ask for aid.”

“We’ll try to catch as many large animals as we can,” Eitan replied, but stiffly, “in the meantime.”

“Yes,” Samyaza whispered. “Please do.” Not far behind him, his monstrous child Ohya was devouring the open side of a bull lying in a pool of deep red. “For the humans and for the giants. Please.” Samyaza, with a solemn frown, released the dove in his hands back to the child nearby. ‘You’ll kill them all,’ Azazel remembered a bird in the forest had told him.

A day passed, then another. There was an attack, somewhere; Azazel heard about it from a hunter. He began to, in what became a week, hear of more raids; he began to sleep worriedly; he began to warily eye the horizon for foreigners — that is, that extended family that belonged to other tribes — with Eitan. He went on every trip with the hunters, a group that had now grown to the size of hundreds of men, and showed them his dagger and explained how he had made the silver and why it was sharper and stronger.

“Bless you,” they thanked him, “angel,” taking his dagger and passing it around to touch the sharp tip.

One night, Azazel even performed a demonstration, instructing the men to build a fire and warning them that it might be some struggle for humans to coax the flames to burn hot enough for smelting, but Eitan stepped forward enthusiastically. Together, with the combined knowing of angels and man, they theorized the best manner to achieve it. ‘While Samyaza dallies,’ Azazel began to tell himself, ‘I’ll offer the men some guidance to protect their families.’ He knew these better weapons would, surely, help them slaughter the animals they needed to feed their people and the giants. ‘While Samyaza lays around and makes

no decision, I'll lead the men.' It humored him: Samyaza had denied Azazel leadership when they arrived to Earth. 'And now I'm the only one the men are listening to.' At least, the sight of the men's blossoming hope soothed some of the fear in his heart; he was certain the humans wouldn't stand the Watchers in their village for much longer.

But, a month had soon passed, and Naamah was at the doorway, looking frail, eyes sunken, in their long tunic, frayed at its ends. "Azazel." The angel had been by a tiny table, polishing some of Eitan's imperfect metalwork with rough fish scales — but he turned away from his work to see the child waltz in, swaying some, heading for the plain hammock hanging by the bedding. "Do you know where my uncle is?"

Azazel blinked. "Oh, he's out patrolling with some men. I'm sure he'll be back soon. Nothing has happened, but I think it makes everyone feel safer."

"Mm." Naamah climbed onto the hammock, but their face was deeply downtrodden, every feature fallen.

Now that the child was closer, Azazel saw a blue-green blotch on their left cheek. "Oh, what's that, Naamah?" He wiped his hands on his Heaven-cotton robe, then stepped closer. "Are you okay?"

"Mostly hungry."

"I have— Oh—" Azazel twisted back to the table, taking a tiny bundle of cloth and swatting away a few gluttonous flies. "Here, eat these berries. I scavenged them from a bush."

"Everything hurts."

Azazel frowned instantly, taking the few steps needed to reach Naamah, who still refused to look at him. "Eat these." Without thinking, he brought one hand to a stray curl by Naamah's ear. "Is there something that hurts the most in particular?" He tried to smile. "Like that cheek? What happened, Naamah? You're always hurting yourself."

Naamah, though lightly, nudged Azazel's hand away, turned onto their side, giving the angel their back. They replied, in near monotone, "I think I should kill myself."

"No," Azazel said so quickly it was like instinct. "Naamah, no. Here, please have some berries."

"After my uncle slapped me this morning, I walked away, and I saw

that a giant tried to eat a little girl before an angel held it back. If a giant tried to eat me, I wouldn't fight it. I don't have anything to live for."

"Slapped... you?" Confused, breathless. "Eitan?"

"Do you think," replied Naamah, "those stupid fucking berries will make me feel better?"

Azazel was trembling, his heart shriveling. "When I was younger," he offered weakly, "I would eat fruits whenever I was sad. But what did you say of Eitan?"

"You don't have anything to be sad about," Naamah replied but swiped the berries at last. "It's the angels that are killing us." The heart of the angel swung as if on a pendulum, but it crashed against his chest, his head feeling heavier, his skin warming unpleasantly. Azazel moved to lean against the hammock some, shaking his head as if to negate this but not daring to utter a word in response. "I've wanted to kill myself, though, for a long time. Even before my parents died. I feel like I don't belong here." They turned their chin, but it was now the angel who didn't want to look back. "When I saw you angels at the mountain, I thought God was giving me a reason to live."

"I'm sorry." What else could Azazel say? He was fidgeting now, wanting to knock both sides of his head with his fists in frustration.

Naamah fiddled with the cloth in their hands, then picked out a berry and placed it against their lips, suckling on it, savoring it with furrowed brows like it were really a knife in their mouth. "I wish I was never born." They pushed the fruit onto their tongue, then said, "I think I should have been an angel."

Azazel nodded, hoping now to steer the conversation away from suicide. "I think so too." He touched Naamah's smaller fingers, gentle and nervous at once. "I see the girls and boys playing outside, but you don't spend time with the other children. Maybe you *are* an angel, and God put you in the wrong body." He nodded, trying to convince the both of them.

Naamah snorted in response, then raised the berries to their mouth, dumping them all in and chewing noisily. "God is in the wrong body too, maybe." But before Azazel could speak, Naamah gestured at the door. "Your friend is out there. The one with the golden hair and mean face."

Azazel startled. “Armoni?” He could hardly remember the last time he saw him. “That’s a relief. I’ll go and speak to him. Stay here and sleep, Naamah. When you wake, you can come with me to gather more berries.” But Naamah said nothing to him as they sighed long and low, their hand going over their belly, their fingers skimming along and likely brushing the ridges of ribs through their tunic. Azazel neared the doorway, touched it, and stepped out with a little bit of a tremble.

The angel Armoni was alone, staring at a sun dipping toward the mountains with a bundle in his arms, as the berries had been in Naamah’s small hands. As Azazel approached, dirt crunched beneath his sandals, and Armoni turned over. It was immediately obvious that it was an infant in the angel of virtue’s hold, though perhaps infant was not the proper term to use any longer — it was a monster, flesh bubbling and boiling, but still not yet large enough to eat any houses.

“Azazel,” Armoni called. “There you are. I always forget which house is yours.” In his arms, the monster kept stirring, letting out wet and small babbles occasionally.

“Armoni—” Azazel stared down at the infant, feeling his face contort in what may have been a grimace, but there was a certain numbness there as well; he felt lagged behind his body. Perhaps, he was in the wrong body as well. “I— Is this your child?”

“Of course. Doesn’t it look just like me?” Armoni laughed at his own joke. “Yes. It’s mine. The last child my wife was pregnant with came out too early, and it was nothing more than blood and pink string.” He gave the beast a squeeze, then bundled it a little tighter. “Her brothers said it was because she wasn’t eating enough, but I don’t trust them. Did you know they make me lay with her? You should’ve seen how angry they were when I returned. I thought they were going to throw me into a bonfire. But look here. I have a child now, and it’s a monster. But they think it won’t be a monster! They’re saying all kinds of things, Azazel. They think we’re making new gods out of angels and man.”

Mind whirling, trying not to splutter, Azazel said, “What? Armoni? They made you... lay with your wife? Is she alright?”

“She’s the poor victim of her family, just a pawn to them. She even tells me she pretends I’m a woman! I feel very sorry for her, but there’s

not much I can do. I'm beginning to understand God; there are some people who simply cannot be saved, and sometimes you must prioritize yourself." Armoni shrugged, then shoved the beast into Azazel's hands, and Azazel jumped in surprise. "Hold it. And follow me. I have something to tell you."

"What—?" Azazel nearly yelped when the infant almost lurched in his hands, as if it was meaning to dart away from him. He remembered how a giant beast had barreled forward, into a house, had eaten men and women, and grown into a mammoth. "That'll happen with you, right?" He watched its eyes, its mouths, then he lifted his gaze once more and said, "Armoni, what are you—?" Instantly, he began moving, hurrying, as the angel in question was walking away from him. "Where are you going? I had no idea where you were. I'm happy you returned to your city unharmed, but you never explained why you came in the first place."

"I wasn't unharmed. I had to rely on someone else to heal me." Azazel asked who. "Danel, if you can believe it. He's having a change of heart, I think. Maybe it's because his wife has become possessed by the monster she birthed. It's all so troubling, isn't it!" Armoni laughed again, turning to the right quite suddenly, almost making Azazel stumble over his own feet. "Come. Step into the forest with me."

"Oh?" Azazel raised his chin, staring at Mount Hermon still quite a walk away. "Why?"

"You never told me where the demons hide." Already, Azazel was frowning. "Well, I found them, without your help. You wouldn't believe how difficult it was. They really do not want to be found, but I found a hole, right by some cherries. It looked like it could have been for rabbits, but I peered in, and I started crawling. It was so small; I had to dig it out some more so I could fit my body through, but I made it eventually, and when I came out the other side, it was with the demons." He stopped, so suddenly once again that Azazel did stumble this time, on a twig, almost falling over and gripping the infant at his chest tighter; it bleated like a goat. "I saw the devil." Armoni twisted on his ankle, looked at the other angel, a certain glee in his eyes. "And he looks beautiful, but I could tell it was a disguise. I caught little hints of how truly grotesque he is beneath."

Azazel, instinctively, squeezed the baby he held, staring at his friend's joyous smile with no clue of what he was supposed to be feeling. "And what did you do?"

"I spoke to some demons. They were not kind to me, but I told them I'd be interested in joining them. I would even give them my child to eat."

Sighing, now — "Armoni, you shouldn't say that. We don't belong among the demons."

"Well, we don't belong among the angels either, do we?" Armoni stepped backward, one end of his mouth twitching. "Regardless — they said they'd speak to the devil about it." He paused, and Azazel stared at him, unblinking, until Armoni chuckled some. "Aren't you curious how I found where they lived? Mount Hermon is so frightening and large that you would think it's impossible, even for an angel. But I —"

Azazel heard rustling — foliage tussling like someone was caught in bedsheets — then turned over, and he saw that there were half a dozen men nearby, standing by a pair of pines. Hunters — he recognized them immediately, and Eitan was among them, shouting out some orders. Azazel whipped back to Armoni, hurriedly wanting to end this conversation. "What is all this about? What are you planning? Do you want me to abandon my human family and run along with you to be a demon?"

Armoni made a noise, huffing and irritated. "I wanted to share a discovery with you."

"Azazel!" The angel didn't turn, but yes, that was Eitan's voice, and he was sharp, cold, and soon there was the sound of footsteps.

"What?" Azazel whispered, feeling himself stiffen as Naamah's words of Eitan's violence returned to his mind. "What did you discover?" His man asked Azazel what he was doing, what was he holding; strongly, he took Azazel's bicep.

Armoni swallowed. "Someone told me exactly where to go, how to find the demons. Elder Adam. We need to go to him. Now."

"What is this? Azazel, why are you holding a beast, what are you hiding from me?" He was red-faced and dripping wet — had certainly been running — and there were streaks on his face of red, around his

eyes. Makeup for war. He must've made it how he'd once made the dyes for Azazel.

"Let go of me, Eitan," stiff but brittle — Azazel replied. "I heard what you did to Naamah."

"Answer me, Azazel."

"Why would you hurt Naamah?"

Armoni stepped forward, took Azazel's other arm, unfurling his wings, and addressed the man. "I'll be taking him."

Eitan twisted his bared teeth, wild eyes, at Armoni. "No, you won't. Let go of my angel."

Azazel was staring at the beast in his arms, turning in its sleep. He could hear the other hunters' voices, louder and louder — like thunder approaching. "No." 'Eitan, you're becoming like this beast.' "No." He felt his friend tug him sharply, tearing him away from Eitan. 'All you humans are the beasts.'

"Come, Azazel. We have to speak to Cain."

Eitan reached out like his arm were a scythe, but the angels managed to hurry and fly away.

CHAPTER 32



At dusk, Samyaza woke to his wife screaming and the sheet on their lofted sleeping mat damp, metal-silver-gold accents catching on his nose, while he laid on his side, watched Idith reach out, grab his tunic at the chest with a fist. From her mouth — a wail, then a wet heave for Samyaza to get the midwives. But, for seconds, he couldn't move, long enough to hear one of their human children whine and lift her head from where she slept with her siblings on a rocking hammock. "Idith," Samyaza whispered. "They won't want to help you." 'They've delivered enough beasts to this poor world.' "Please. I can try and find help but you're scaring the children —" She struck him, across the mouth.

By no mean was it strong enough to send his head twisting to any side, nor to throw him off the bed, or even to hurt any more than a sting — but one of the girls cried out in shock, and the youngest — a five-year-old boy — let out a long, pitched whimper. Before Samyaza could speak, they were all — the three children — scurrying out of their hammock.

"I'm sorry," left his mouth in a shuddering whisper. "I'm sorry. Let me help you." He didn't know where the midwives gathered those blocks that she had leaned over when the first birth occurred, and Idith was soon kicking out her legs, shouting, and the children had run out

the entrance. Grabbing Samyaza's arm, Idith pulled with a sudden, inhuman strength. "Idith!" Her face swerved toward his shoulder, her mouth opening wide, then she bit him so hard all he could do was open his mouth to scream, though nothing sounded. Instead, he heard the crunch of bone, the wet splatter of blood, then the slurp, largely unfeeling of the pierce and break of his own body.

But he didn't complain; he held her.

'I did this.' Samyaza groaned out in sick, sick pain, his mind whirling, his chest jolting with a heart eager to escape. His mouth was wet, with saliva first then blood, but he gurgled and did nothing except shudder. When his wife drew back, stepped into the center of the tiny hut, she left on Samyaza a gaping hole of red so dark it was abyssal, the jagged, bleeding ring around it numb, the center pulsating. Idith shrieked like an animal, distant in the forest.

Samyaza couldn't bear to watch the horror of birth, so he shut his eyes when she fell into a squat. But in his mind, he continued to see her mouth covered in blood, dribbling down onto her chest, her belly. In his ears, her beastly grunts scratched and twisted until the howls of a monster, clawing out, began to fill the space. His terrified gasps, both forced-quiet and rapid, did little to break through all the noise of despair; he couldn't help but think, 'Good God, you have abandoned us.' He waited. 'You've abandoned an angel.' He imagined his Father yelling at him, and his throat pricked, his eyes scorched. 'Please, please, let me come home now. I'm scared.' A few more wet tears, then a dry heave as a final splurge of blood landed on the ground. Finally, a *thump* — someone falling over.

"Help me," came a dry, guttural beg, but when Samyaza finally turned over, she was on the ground, cradling a new monster in her arms, hardly a giant — a puddle that kept rippling with some hints of feathers and flesh, crackles like it was composed of fire. And he could do no more than be held captive by the sudden moving of his body, his unsteady, rocking steps toward her, then lowering onto his knees. He was able to reach their pitcher of water right nearby — and he poured it onto her body like he was thinking of cleaning her. Purifying her; sanctifying her. He kissed her on the mouth.

He was crying. "I've destroyed you, I've ruined your life."

She grinned, teeth reddened in his blood. "You've made me like God."

'With His same bloodthirst.'

Samyaza prayed for his Father with nothing but agony now, wondering if there was any mercy left for him. He did it for days, for weeks. But perhaps all of the Lord's mercy had been taken in the forgiveness after the war, and there was no God left, only a drought where there had once been a sea of love and mercy. The blubbling pleas that spilled from Samyaza ached and persisted without any reply from Him.

But Raphael, seemingly, responded, some time later. He descended onto the Earth, settling one sandal onto the ground, then his long, thin oak staff and his other foot. With a flap of his wings for balance, he gripped his walking aid with both hands, squinting to try and see through the merciless sun. Some snakes of smoke were climbing toward and around him, the fires from which they'd been conceived having simmered into ember and ash, mere tails of it climbing up and unto Heaven. A few crackles sounded nearby, then the creak of wood collapsing — the skeletons of a dozen nearby huts falling into themselves. Soon thereafter, Raphael breathed in the stench — rotten and metallurgic — humans grilled, like the cattle they were.

Out from behind a home, however, rushed a child, a boy with almond hair, blue-green eyes, and a ribbon tied around his temples, wearing no more than a folded cloth of a tunic, covering his front and his back. *Ta, ta* — his sandals beat against the ground, in between the wet gasps of him, his cries, the sudden, stark intake of shortened breath, then a high-pitched yelp as he saw the angel before him. The boy skidded, trying to stop, but it wasn't quick enough, and with the hand that wasn't clutching his staff, Raphael grabbed the boy, wrenched him closer. "Do not be afraid—" He felt all the life in his lungs rush out, then he repeated himself. "Do not be afraid. I won't hurt you."

Beneath his hand, the boy trembled against the angel's front, but his heaving was growing to still, and when Raphael found his balance wavering, he felt the boy put his arms around his torso. Suddenly, he was leaning a little on him too; they were upholding one another.

er. ‘Lord,’ Raphael thought thoughtlessly. ‘How can you allow this? What am I seeing?’ His stomach was lurching, his eyes were staring at the scene of roasted, crisped bodies and family homes. ‘Am I in a dream? A nightmare?’

“Raphael.” *Clink, clink* — the call of hefty chains.

The sound of his name was like a bite, and instantly, it made the archangel put his hand on the boy’s back and steady himself, adjusting his weight onto his walking stick. Turning his head, slow, gutturally aware of the village sizzling beneath the same sun as him, he said, “Michael—” Raphael saw him, under the heat, with many, many, steps separating them: the chief prince in his silver armor, bloodied cloak, golden helmet, sword in one strong hand.

“You,” said Michael, “shouldn’t be here.” Over one of his shoulders, Raphael caught other figures, armored like Michael — most angels with their wings half-bent, but some demons with tails, horns, claws. And there were also some more stout creatures, dressed in cloth armor, holding wood and stone to fight, and they were cowering, standing behind the heavenly creatures — measly men. In total, there could have been several hundred.

“I see it’s true,” Raphael whispered sharply, pulling the child even closer, as if he could hide him within himself. “You’re working with the devil.”

“Return to Heaven.”

“Brother,” Raphael continued, shaking his head. “You’re killing innocent people. Many of these humans— They’re not those who’ve paired with the Watchers.”

“The Lord said to wage war,” was the chief prince’s answer as he stepped closer, tapping a silver finger against the hilt of his sword, resting against a shoulder. “And now I’m waging war. I’m doing as told, and I am good. If you cannot be obedient to God, then you are wicked.” He crept forward some more. “And I believe you remember what I did to a disobedient angel, long ago now.”

Raphael swallowed down the glass shards in his throat, and he heard the child whimper before the angel placed a hand in his hair. “You loved him.” Michael stopped. “You kissed him.” He had seen it: angel lips falling onto each other’s cheeks in passing.

"I love God." The words were much stiffer, brittle, this time.

"This isn't love, brother. You don't love God and now I wonder if you ever loved the devil, or— Or if you destroyed the greatest angel for nothing." Raphael now staggered back with the child, feeling the gaze of the chief prince hotter than the simmer of the village, the heat of death. "I'll report to God what you've done. He'll know that you've been aligning yourself with His enemy. And I'll tell Gabriel. You'll break Gabriel's heart, Michael. He's afraid of you now. He tells me he doesn't know who you are—"

Michael grunted, as if physically restraining himself, then cut in, "The Lord knows everything, and He knows that I've allied with the demons."

Raphael stared, catching the light shining off the sword of his brother. "He knows you've gone to the devil?"

"Didn't Uriel tell you?" the chief prince replied, gravely slow. "The Lord was the one who gave the order. He commanded me to wage war on man and to bring Satan home."

But Samyaza — he knew nothing of this exchange. He, some days later, flew high above the same burned village but quickly, shooting past in a blur so that the couple of armored angels and demons stationed among the rubble didn't see him. With a bite of his lip, he swerved away, beating his wings even faster beneath the bright sky, climbing up high, higher, but refusing to go up into the clouds. Instead, he dived back down, toward a lake. There, he caught a familiar figure sitting on the ground, his back against one of a few trees, and Samyaza flew to him, pulled his legs closer, then dropped to land in a crouch right nearby. "Danel," he called, instantly, only to notice that the Watcher was staring at the water, where a giant had twisted and curled its long neck to bring a small human-like face to lick at the surface. "Oh—"

"There aren't any survivors that I saw," Danel said, and Samyaza turned back to see he'd removed his headscarf, his oak-brown hair splayed messily onto his shoulders. "Did you see any?" His eyes had been green but seemed now as murky as the lake.

Samyaza breathed out through his nose. "No. Did Kokabiel tell you how many he managed to evacuate?"

“Around two-thirds.” Danel flickered his gaze over when Samyaza settled down beside him with a grunt. “The giants seem eternal, like us, or they’re very, very, difficult to kill. I heard Michael tried to scorch them when they attacked, but according to Baraqiel, he failed. The giants just rolled around the dirt, ate the flames, and grew even bigger.” He paused, then murmured, “Baraqiel also told me that the giants are the ones responsible for fending off the demons and angels, especially Kokabiel’s child. I finally see why some humans like them — the giants.. I heard Armoni’s city is even praying to the giants.”

Samyaza raised a brow. “You’ve talked to Armoni?”

“I haven’t had a change of heart,” Danel said rapidly. “Don’t misunderstand. Armoni is a rotten sinner. But—” He coughed. “I spoke with him briefly. He needed some simple healing after a giant bit him. He explained some things to me then.” There was a slow, terrible hesitation. “So what should we do now, Samyaza?”

Samyaza swallowed. “I don’t know.” How could he? “Just a few hours ago, the hunters of Enoch’s settlement wandered out to kill any... foreigners. They’re placing blame on other humans. They said they want to war. I don’t know how they know of war, Danel. I don’t know what we can do now.”

Danel answered, “Repent. Penance.”

Turning his head, Samyaza stared at Danel, who was eyeing the lake before them and his monster. “What?”

“My wife, Samyaza. She’s pregnant again. You said not to touch our women anymore, but I woke up with her on top of me, and she was holding a knife to my face, and—” He hacked out a laugh that was scarily reminiscent of Kokabiel. “She’s not who she used to be. I don’t know what’s happened to her. She used to be really kind and patient. Whenever my temper took over, she would scold me, and I would listen. I can’t stand to look at her anymore. God has made her a monster, or God has allowed me to make her a monster.” He raised his hands and planted them over his face., fingers rubbing his eyes, a grimace barely visible beneath his palms. “And, a few weeks ago, I decided to stay with her brother.”

When Danel hesitated, the leader of the Watchers prodded, “And?”

Grunting, mumbling, “He seduced me. I sucked his cock.”

Samyaza sighed, strained. “Damn my soul! God should damn my soul! If I don’t repent now, I’ll fall deeper into this hole of hypocrisy. Damn my soul!” He dropped one hand, curled it into a fist, and pounded the dirt in fury, a scrap of skin over his knuckles tearing clean off, blood dotting. “When Michael disappeared, and Gabriel, Raphael, and even Uriel — that damn uptight Uriel — did nothing, and there was a void of power in Heaven — I wanted to step in. I tried to do the right thing, Samyaza! I blamed the sinners! And I blamed all the young angels! I will continue to blame the young until paradise is restored. I never should have let you bring me here, but I was the one who defended women and married! This is *my* sin! I’m a whore!”

Samyaza tried to touch his arm. “Danel—”

“I built Heaven!” Danel beat his fist. “I was one of those at the birth of the city when there was just darkness, stars, and a bowl of light. I helped build the streets the war destroyed.” Samyaza knew that. “When only Uriel was the prince, everything was quieter and orderly.” Samyaza could hardly remember that time, though he’d only experienced the final moments of Uriel’s dictatorship; there had been many, many, angels already, too many for Uriel to handle alone. “But millions, billions, of years passed and suddenly every angel was only concerned with pleasure. I trusted in us and look what happened. The devil made fools of you all. He sang and danced with you all down to his filth.” But he was shaking. “I never should have believed you, Samyaza. I’m going to ask for forgiveness. I will turn myself over before anything gets worse.”

Samyaza remembered meeting Raphael at a river; he was not a prince yet, though Raphael was healing some bloodied swelling at an ankle. The newborn angel had shuffled closer, stepped onto the pebbles of the bank, before the healing angel turned and saw him and smiled. He gestured him over, told him not to be shy. Samyaza had been mystified. ‘I asked what the red leaking out of you was.’ Raphael had laughed, and now that Samyaza was remembering, he realized that he’d never quite received an answer.

Danel, at his side, darted to his feet. “I need to go.”

“Where?” The word was in Samyaza’s voice, but he hardly felt saying it. “You’re not serious.” He placed a hand on the ground, trem-

bling — was it really his own hand that he used? ‘Whose body is this that I’m in? This isn’t my body, is it?’ His face crushed in a deep cringe, but he shook his head, too aware of each muscle pulling when he staggered, and all his senses were overwhelmed thereafter. The wetness of the lake, the splashes of the monster in the water, the gruff breath that huffed from Danel’s mouth. “You’re not going to turn yourself in.”

“Damn your soul too, Samyaza.” Danel kicked, a pebble picked and flung off the ground, then set his sandal back down as harshly as his fist had struck the dirt. “I’ll tell Michael to force you to make penance, as well.”

Samyaza felt his eyebrows furrow. “Do you think Michael will really save you?”

“I still believe in God,” Danel spit. “We’re His children. All of us.” His face was tremoring, his eyes must’ve been itching. “I’ll repent. I have no other choice.” Samyaza reached for him. “Don’t touch me! Don’t touch me!” His voice was shrill as he staggered back, away, flinching, and breathing so harsh that it must’ve hurt. He was hurting. “Get away from me.” Samyaza heard the growling, stirring, of the beast nearby, but the leader of the Watchers couldn’t get himself to look at it now. His own heart ached.

He could chase after Danel; he did not. When he heard the footsteps of an angel hurrying away, then the unfurling of his wings, Samyaza remained where he was, watching the giant at the lake who snapped its head up, then leapt into a pouncing run across the grass, following behind its winged parent. Samyaza was thinking of Raphael still, thinking of how he had told him once that he felt a bit impatient, a bit bored. Raphael had said that an angel must learn to appreciate the quiet moments. He would miss them someday. Living an eternity was like living in an endless portrait, and an angel had to touch the closest brushstrokes to make some sense of what the great image they lived on might be.

Samyaza touched his braids, and he stood, and he felt as if his life had only begun recently despite all these supposed memories. Raphael had taught him to heal with a gentle hand once. He had learned to fly once. He had sat with his housemate Azazel once and watched him paint, then looked away with flushed cheeks. He’d been angered, and

he should be angrier now, at Danel, but he wasn't, wasn't. Samyaza soon found his feet moving beneath him. He would return for now. He would sleep. He would speak to the hunters.

And with a great strike of his wings, he rose into the sky again, saw the village burned to dark spheres painted on the ground and to rubble. He saw an angel there and a demon with great horns, but no Michael. Samyaza twisted and hurried away, trying now to find any thought that would pull him from the abyss of pain that was opening wide in his head and trailing down to his center. He felt as if he'd split. He felt this for the couple hours of flight it took to reach home, Enoch's tribe, which had been left without Enoch. Passing far above, he caught every field burnt and too many animal corpses littering the dirt. When he saw an old woman by a hut, her hair frazzled and her face red, he headed toward her.

The angel landed at her side, tried to speak, but when she saw him, a wretched sob jolted her. The hiccups in between made her sound much younger than she could have been. Samyaza whispered, "What is wrong? Please tell me." But the elderly woman shivered and sniffed. Nearby, there was a pile of bones, almost perfectly picked of meat. "I have to leave to check on my wife and my child, but if there's anything that you need—"

Someone was grunting nearby, and he turned to see a group of men, hunters, with their spears, shouting about waging an attack.

"Samyaza!" It was the chief Eitan, among them, dressed in his animal-skin cape. "We saw some foreigners by the river recently — we scared them off." When the large, bearded man approached him, Samyaza shook his head and tried to walk past, but Eitan only followed, coming nearer to him, saying, "Can I speak with you tonight? I have ideas for this war."

"Tonight?" Samyaza echoed dryly, trying not to shake too visibly. 'Danel. The burnt village. My wife. My new child. Where am I?' He heard Eitan call another few words after him, but Samyaza was so trapped in his own violent fear that he couldn't untangle the sounds to make sense of them.

Furiously, Eitan grabbed him with the harshness of a demon and snarled, "It's the least you can do since we've heard you're back to

fucking your woman—” Shoving — so strong that Eitan crashed into the ground, that Samyaza was rushed with fear for the man, for himself, and he twisted around. He hurried; he headed for home, not hearing a single word shouted after him, thinking instead of Raphael, thinking of paradise. War.

Past the doorway, Samyaza stopped, finding himself beside his oldest daughter, who was standing right by the exit, who quickly reached for Samyaza’s hand frightfully. Before them, Idith was on the ground, hunched over a four-limbed, white-furred creature that might’ve been a lamb beneath the ropes of entrails. She squashed an eyeball in her mouth, whereas the newest-born monster was in the hammock where the children usually slept. ‘What is there to do now?’ He missed paradise — even the worst of paradise had not been like this. ‘I’m sorry,’ he told his daughter, then guided her out, but even several steps away from the house, they could hear her mother gurgling on wet, squelching tissue.

“I’m scared.”

“It’ll be alright.” He was trying to convince himself, trying not to laugh and cry. “Everything has always turned out alright, honey.” Idith had called him honey once. “Come, come, let’s walk.” Slow, one of his hands went to her shoulder, and he pulled her closer. “Let’s walk. Come. Let’s walk and breathe.” She said her chest hurts; can he fix it? He could not. ‘If I could mend a heart, I wouldn’t be here, would I?’

Instead of meeting Eitan that night, Samyaza trudged to the river, and he fell to his knees, and he reached for his hair with a stone dagger. He sawed, watched the loosest strands fall first, and caught his reflection on the surface of water shining a setting sun. ‘God, you must have never loved me.’ He scratched, scratched at the waves of dark. ‘I must have been nobody to you. Nobody will remember my face. They will erase my name, and they will spit on my memory.’ He bent into himself, almost curled fetally like he was in the belly of a beast. ‘I have no love anymore. The woman I loved is dead. The angel I loved will hate me forever. And you will never forgive me. And I am dead too.’ There was nothing to do except scream harsh into his hands, littered with hair, the creation of God.

But he couldn’t bring himself to ask for forgiveness, not anymore.

CHAPTER 33



It's a matter of days before Armoni and Azazel reach Cain's city. Of this, Armoni was not happy; he often stopped to say, "Azazel, please. Let's fly. Do we really have to walk? Do you think Michael's army will see us while we're in the air? Maybe they will, but what is the worst they can do? Dismember us? Burn us? I can hardly think of a worse punishment than this walking."

"Armoni, stop being so dramatic." But Azazel laughed a little, happy to still be capable of humor. "Walking is safer, and there's no hurry, is there?" Armoni said maybe they would arrive to a ruined city. "And what would we do if we arrived before it's ruined? Save it? I'm no good for saving anything."

"What are you good for then, brother?"

"Painting my lips, kissing men."

Armoni stepped closer to him, hooked his non-infant-carrying arm on his, then snorted. By his other side, a great cactus shook with a barrage of wind that tossed their hair together — dark braids and tussles of blonde. Together, they continued through the desert, relieved not to need water but still posturing their open mouths to the sky on the few occasions a passing cloud had the pity to drizzle onto them. When the walls of the city approached them, Armoni tugged Azazel closer, led him past the open entrance but away from the main street.

There, Azazel could see humans, like shortly before the banishment of Enoch's people, carrying baskets of produce, baskets of meat. Armoni whispered it was all for the giants.

Instead of heading toward the front of the greatest house in the city — where three guards with spears were stationed — Armoni guided his friend along a bare wall on the side, shuffling toward the back. The two had to fly over a wall quickly, dropping into a courtyard for herbs and mostly decorative flowers. Before Azazel could take the time to examine the muraled walls, Armoni ushered him quickly past an open doorway, a corridor, a second one. Just as the noise of men shouting reached them, Armoni dragged Azazel past a curtain on the righthand wall. They stumbled, the two of them, into almost certain darkness, sans the weak glow of a distant candle. Elder Adam in his bed, in his filth.

"It's true," said Armoni.

Adam chuckled, his eyes closed. "Welcome back, my friend."

"You're really Cain," answered Armoni, and all Azazel could do was breathe.

Cain was rather expressionless, hand over his belly, a fly fluttering so near to his hair that Azazel thought it would land in the mop of white, loose curls splayed over his pillows with many minuscule braids scattered. His eyebrows, also overtly pale, twitched, and he replied, "It's nice to be called that again. Long ago, one of my sons began to say that I'd wandered off, and I thought no one would believe it, but despite knowing my face — everyone agreed. When humans hate the truth, they're so, so, willing to convince themselves of things, no matter how impossible they may be." Azazel opened his mouth, but the elder coughed out, the sound wheezy and spent. "But here I am. Cain. My mother and my father are long dead, and even Seth is dead, all my first siblings are dead, but I remain. I've remained so long, I could be like God among men."

Azazel stepped closer. "You must be thousands of years old. How have you managed to survive so long?"

"Only God can kill me," replied the man. "He promised it to me, long ago."

Armoni soon approached, as well, settling down at the edge of the

bed, scooting, gesturing vaguely for Azazel to sit too. “How did you know where Satan lives? What secrets are you keeping? What is God hiding?”

“I didn’t know God kept secrets from his angels.”

Azazel sat, breathing slowly. “We’ve never known what occurred in Eden.”

“I’m so old,” Cain replied. “When men are old, they start to tell stories. It’s our greatest vice.” His eyes creaked open, revealing voids like Azazel had only ever seen in the universe far above. “But our memories are faulty; we’re not like angels.” Azazel thought to say that angels had faulty memories too; they were not perfect, only God was perfect. “And I wasn’t there in Eden, but sometimes the memories of our parents sing out from our bones, and I remember being Adam. I remember my flesh tangled in the same Earth that God’s fingers bore holes into; I was made of holes. I still am. And from birth, I was disfigured; I could feel the cuts that the Lord pinned to the bottom of my nose, and I was cold, because He’d stripped me of all the hair that my parents had. I had parents, at least I believe I did before I was Adam. Before He took me from the other animals and tore me to pieces over the Earth, then remade me.”

‘I remember the arching of my back, my chest lifting as if into Heaven, then His mouth huffing life into my misshapen body. He handled me so tenderly — I had no choice but to believe Him, believe in Him. I had no will but to love Him. My hands, outstretching, taking His in paradise on Earth. I knew it was Earth already — the memories of my parents lingered, but I had a new parent now. I had come from the Earth, and I had come out of my Father’s mouth. I had been born here, born wrong. He had made me wrong. There was a hole in me. I was missing a body that I’d never had, pieces that belonged to something like a memory that I could not return to. Make me again, God. Look at me, Father. Dig your fingers into me, and I will tell you how my body was in a distant past, how I am missing a life I never lived. Allow me to become a body, not be trapped in this one.’

“Cain?” Azazel called, then the old man breathed and spoke once more.

“He saw me — God. And He said I was His favorite creation, and

that we would be alone in paradise, and He entertained me with each animal, but I said I was unhappy. I didn't know why. I had everything, I had God, but I was unhappy. I ran from Him, and I tried to bash my head into a stone. After the Lord stopped me, He asked, 'Why are you lonely?' I said, 'I want to be held. Not by you but something like you.' And when I slept that night, He made another hole in me, through my side, tearing out my side." 'When I roused from sleep, she stood over me, and she was strong, and she fell to her knees, and she embraced me.' "I had named every animal in Eden, but it was a woman who named me. She called me Adam." 'I called her, My love.' "Adam named the woman Eve but only much later, after Eden."

"You lived," said Armoni, "in Eden for a hundred thousand years."

"After Eve, living was sweeter. I became a man, after the split. Though, angels, I remember being Eve too. I remember curiosity, the laughter, the running. I was strong, and I was beautiful, and when God told us to never eat from a certain tree, I said that I had no interest. I loved Adam, and he loved me. I saw angels, though only from afar, and they were winged and beautiful, and it was only them that made me dissatisfied with paradise." 'If only I was an angel. If only I could fly like them and see all the Earth.' "But what we didn't know was that the animals had souls too, and a hissing serpent watched God touch my mouth, then touch Adam's with all the love in the universe, and she, the snake, escaped from the Garden of Eden."

"In those days, the demons roamed all the Earth outside of Eden. They did it with impunity, and they shepherded all the land like they had done to all the flower pots in Heaven, though they allowed it to be as independent as them, never fought with it. They lived in caves, in the tunnels they carved into mountains, and the serpent traveled to the house of the devil. She saw him, and she loved him instantly, winding her way around one of his legs, traveling up his body as he slept. When Satan woke, he yawned and stretched, then lifted his leg. He asked if something was wrong. She said, 'God has new favorites. And, all us other animals — He has left us to live in the shadow of Man. But He told them not to eat from a certain tree — the one of Knowledge.' Satan sighed, then he said, 'Stay here until you shed your old skin. Once it's fallen, I'll wear it and disguise myself as you, and I'll take

your place in Eden. And I will convince Man to eat the fruit.' And it was so.

"When Satan first visited Eden, he couldn't stand to be there very long. He later told me it was because there was something sinister beneath the soil, and that God was sinister. The first time, then, he only watched the humans from afar. He was surprised to see two of them. A strong one — woman — and a terribly lonely one — man; both looked unfinished, like a parody of a perfect union. Before him, they kissed." 'And Lucifer remembered he had a heart, after all, could feel it bleed inside him. How could God corrupt Lucifer's own creation? It was him, as an angel, that had loved an equal first, had been driven to the depths of fury, covered in the blood of love. It was a horror, horror so great he could only feel it as a certain, familiar shame within, the roots like flames, taking hold of his tongue; he thought he'd spit fire.' "The next time he visited Eden, he approached."

"The woman?" Azazel asked.

"The woman. The devil approached her because she was nearest the tree where he was hidden among the branches. For a moment, he removed his disguise, and he laid on his stomach over a branch, and he hummed for her attention. They looked at one another — Satan and the woman." 'Eve told Lucifer that he was beautiful, and he said that he knew, but he caught the happy glint in her eyes, and she reminded him of himself. He reached for her, touched her hair, and he told her that he could teach her to braid it.' "Few know this, but Satan hesitated. Twice, he hesitated. He could have killed the humans. He knew the Lord was allowing him to decide. But, he saw the happy Eve, smiling so often, leaning against her beloved man every day. Satan watched them from the leaves, and sometimes, Eve ran to him and offered a pomegranate and put a finger to her lips, assuring the devil that she would not tell God that he was there. And Eve named Lucifer her friend, the first friend of a human."

'Lucifer?' Azazel almost asked how Cain knew this name, but he did not.

"We'll never know why Satan offered her the forbidden fruit. Was he jealous? Did he see man and woman and think that he deserved love like they had? Or was it Eden? He saw glimpses of God, and he did not

trust Him. Maybe he saw through this paradise. So, he took the fruit of Knowledge, and he told Eve to eat it.” ‘You will know the truth of this place. You will certainly not die. Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil. With just a taste.’ “The woman was convinced, and she took a bite, then she hurried to find Adam, and he ate from the fruit as well. After this, they saw God had kept them naked. They screamed and tried to hide themselves, their shame; they made clothes from figs. When they heard God’s heavy steps, they ran once more.

“God called out, and Adam confessed that they were hiding because they were naked. Furious, God asked who told them that they were naked.” ‘I don’t know. The fruit told me, in my throat, that I’m naked, and my flesh sags, and I’m a disfigured animal in God’s paradise.’ “When the two couldn’t answer, God gathered all the snakes of the Earth, and he tore out their legs until they were creeping, slithering things. He told Eve that He would make birth a pain, and her husband would rule over her.” ‘Lucifer had escaped in time, but he looked back beneath the brewing storm, and he saw a wrathful God skinning creatures for the humans to clothe themselves with. God laughing at them. You want to be an animal like you were before I saved you, then wear the costume of one. See how Satan has led you astray, see how God’s creation corrupted His creation, distorted equal love into dominance. Now the love of humans is destroyed forever, and Satan has done it. He has destroyed love.’ Perhaps God had needed a villain, and Satan had unknowingly taken the part. ‘We have destroyed it together, Lucifer.’

“They were thrown out from Eden, then,” Azazel murmured; he had seen this depicted in a monument. “Michael was the one who cast them from paradise.” His gaze traveled to the potted plants on the sill of the old man’s bedroom window. “It was the first time I’d even heard Michael’s name since the war for Heaven.”

“Before they left,” Cain replied, “God made the humans clothes of animal skin, and He told the angels, ‘Man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil,’ and ‘They must not be allowed to take also from the Tree of Life, and eat, and live forever.’ And Adam and Eve wandered out like infants, bumping into every rock, every tree, not

knowing how to gather food that didn't grow right into their asking hands.

"But with their new knowing, the first thing they did was fuck." 'The first human fucking and the birthing of shame. I remember trembling, his hands on my legs, his nails slicing into me, and every part of my body like it was suddenly too heavy and wilting in every wrong direction. Bleeding — but I was growing accustomed to bleeding, every turn of the moon, stabbing crescents into my lower belly. Maybe God had cut me deep inside; I was nothing now but a gaping, open wound beneath my skin. This must be hate — Lord, you see Eve fallen like that forbidden fruit, like your angel, and rotten over the Earth; am I the first thing God ever hated? Satan said I was a mirror; do you see yourself in Eve, too, God? Is that what made you hate me? What made you place me beside that tree, ripe for knowledge, ripe for corruption? A scream rupturing out of me shakes the Earth until Adam has torn himself back out, staggered off and away.' "The first pregnancy in human history would be agony."

"Eve must've been alone," said Armoni with a touch of somberness. "She must've been terrified."

"She was," answered Cain, "scared, but alone she wasn't. Before she realized she was pregnant, she was running away from Adam, wondering if he was changing or if it was her. And she stumbled upon the devil once again; he was at the bank of a river, sitting with his feet in the water. She yelled at him, grabbed stones, and threw them. Her anger was so much that she began to cry, then she ran away. But, another phase of the moon passed, and she noticed she wasn't bleeding, and when she saw Satan again, she asked him if he knew why — she had no one else.

"The devil had tended the land and all its animals until the arrival of humans, and so he knew birth," 'and Lucifer's chest ached like something was missing from it suddenly,' "and he gestured for her to follow, and he showed her a sow with her piglets, and Eve understood." Cain, at this point, hesitated, and Azazel was catching the end of his mouth twitching like this memory was more personal than it should be; angels could not understand ancestral memory; Azazel had come from fire, from an unfeeling part of God. "What can I say here? Eve

was the first human to experience complete and utter terror. She became a stranger in her own body.” ‘And I think I’m bloating like every organ in me is trying to escape, I’m growing heavier, my skin is blistering.’ “She hated it, hated herself. And Adam began to see her like a monster.

“But Satan visited Eve, often. Adam was no good at hunting, nor at agriculture, so when winters came, Satan ordered one great animal killed and left at their door. Adam spat at the ground, saying that he would not eat anything the devil offered again, but Eve had the hunger of two, so she ate. And whenever Adam was absent, Satan helped clean her, held her, and even dried her tears. She told him she felt like she was turning inside out, and Satan apologized for her suffering but not for what he’d done in Eden.

“When the birth came, Eve was alone, screaming in her hut, with the devil. He had seen birthing before, but this had a new pain and blood that he knew God had created in Eden, in fury.” ‘The pain bloats, like you bloat, until it bursts into light, around you, up, below, and you can’t see any hint of darkness. Blinded by the light. You see so much that you see nothing at all. So much pain that you open your mouth, and you cannot even scream.’ “She hated her firstborn. Of course she did. He came out of her bloody, like he had killed her, and he was ugly, wrinkled — nothing like her or even Adam. She hated him; she saw him as just a residue of fucking, of banishment. And soon she may die, but this ugly, wailing thing would live. She would not feed it. Satan explained how she could, but Eve refused. She put her hands on Cain’s neck—”

A sudden falter, so abrupt the angels took the second of silence to glance at one another.

“I,” the old man forced out, “was the first human — Adam and Eve were hardly human, their bodies still made by the hands of God, their faces symmetrical. They could have been angels. But I was tiny and like a prune. I was born damned, all humans are, so of course all I did was cry. My mother did try to feed me. But, often, she tried to kill me. Sometimes, she had spells of love, but often, she crushed my throat until my skin went blue. Satan never stopped her. He told her to do it, if she hated me so much, but Eve never mustered the courage. Instead,

she would throw my little body at him, tell him to look after me while she went to vomit. Soon, the devil began holding me more than my mother.

“And my father — I suppose I was like shit to him. An unshapely waste that stunk the side of the room whenever he wanted to fuck my mother. My first memory of my father is listening to him have sex with my mother; he was yelling, he was angry. I met him angry. The first time I felt his touch, it was a slap. So easily I could have believed that to be loved is to be hurt, but love did come to me. The devil — he often stole and carried me away when my parents fought or fucked or both. Sometimes, he took me just to feed me.” Then, Cain was chuckling, warm and happy. “Lucifer once said that, when Baal first saw me, he tried to eat me, but my tiny hand touched his claw, and he melted with fondness.

“I learned to run away, far too young. I wandered out of our hut, toward the mountain. The first place I learned to go was home, and home was the devil. Whenever I returned, my parents were angry, but I think they were angry because I hadn’t died while I was gone. Satan took me in every time.” ‘I remember crawling to sleep in between him and Baal, and then Lucifer snapping for Baal to get me some water, and I remember giggling.’ “Satan clothed me, fed me.” ‘I sat on Lucifer’s lap and listened to his musical hums as he embroidered a little tunic just for me.’ “He even had his demons build me a bed, made of roots and decorated with flowers. My own room in the cave of the devils. I loved them.

“Around me, the demons acted kind, and when I trailed behind Lucifer, clutching his clothes, they made faces at me to make me laugh. I wanted to be just like them. I pretended I had horns and a tail. Lucifer would not indulge me, but Baal did.” ‘The wind battered my face when Baal flew high in the air with me. I was giggling and saying, I want to be just like you. Baal landed on a high tree, kissing my curls and saying, You will be. You’ll grow wings just like me one day.’ “I also loved to watch the demons fight each other. I loved their violence. I thought they were strong and powerful. They could fight back and piece one another back together. Nothing like how I laid still when my father struck me.”

“Cain—” Azazel tried to say.

“Abel was born a few years after me, but I only noticed the difference in our treatment once we were about fourteen years of age. My father had been there for his birth, had seen Abel’s eyes the same color as his, and my mother was not so horrified this time. They kissed him, though they had never kissed me. I was original sin, and Abel was now a familiar, comfortable sin. I wandered away to the demons every chance I could, but Abel remained with my father and took care of the cattle. I learned from the demons how to cultivate fruit, how to tend crops. I braided my hair like they did — Lucifer taught me — and I returned to the humans only for my father to force me down and cut every thread on my scalp. Spit on me for acting as demonic as the serpent that tore them from some paradise I didn’t know.”

‘Screaming, thrashing, I begged him not to touch me, I reached out, I saw Abel there, holding a spear just like our Father’s, but he turned away from us. He only cared for God. He said, God will forgive us. I had so many times tried to speak of the demons to him, but Abel always gagged at their mention. He called them beasts. I said our parents are beasts, and he turned away from me then too. I ran, I screamed until my lungs were charred. When I found Lucifer, I cried into his tunic. He held me, told me I could stay longer this time. I could feel his trembling. I said, Lucifer, my father hurt me, and Lucifer said, Mine did too.’

“When I grew older, a wandering demon came into the devil’s caves. He was beautiful — gray eyes and long red hair.” ‘He walked with a sway of his hips, and he had long legs, while I was short and growing too hairy, itchy everywhere.’ “I fell in love with him.” ‘I had sisters already now. I didn’t look at them. Abel did. He told me our second oldest sister was developing nicely.’ “I asked a demon for help with my feelings. Rosier was his name.” ‘I can still remember his stammering, his uncertainty. I learned that even old demons can know nothing of love.’ “He told me that I shouldn’t take an interest in any demon. I didn’t listen. Within a few years, I began courting him. His name was Ara.”

‘Ah. Ara, you were hesitant! I remember that! I still remember you. You were in the forest, your feet in a stream, your tail sweeping behind

you. For another year, you wouldn't let me kiss you. I was angry then, but I understand now. I was so uncomfortable living. I was sick to my stomach breathing. With the humans, I was a monster. With the demons, I was an animal. I heard you had made bread in Heaven, so I learned to make it too. In secret to the devil and all the others, I left you presents. The first courting in history. When we were finally alone, I whispered that if I'm really mortal, let me taste eternal life on your lips. You breathed and shuddered. If I put my mouth between your legs, could I draw out a taste of eternity?"

Cain wheezed in a laugh, "I'm losing myself in my thoughts."

At this, Armoni scoffed. "You are. I want to know why you killed Abel."

"Fucking a divine creature is a dangerous thing, Armoni. In the weeks, months, after I'd begun my romance with Ara, I was acting odd. Suddenly, all I wanted was to fuck. I scratched at my skin until it bled." 'I became addicted to the feeling of God — the Lord shaped like the tight heat of my beautiful demon. I'd never believed in the Lord's love, but I believed in Ara's chuckles when I rocked into him. He made me see stars, and I found constellations in them, like I were God creating a universe.' "Satan, when he learned of the relationship, forbid it." 'He said I was killing myself. I said, I want to die for love. He said, You will die for God's twisted pleasure. I said, Ara is my god, and for his pleasure, I will happily die.' "Only now, in my old age, I understand that Lucifer was only afraid. If I died, my soul would've surely landed in God's wrathful hands.

"But Lucifer had only ever been kind to me. He'd been the only living thing I thought couldn't be cruel. I was terrified by his rage. And when Ara didn't dare go against his king, agony overtook me." At this, Cain sighed. "I was alone." His laugh was tragic — sad and high with strain. "My father struck me, but I didn't fight back. I tried to cry to my mother, but she turned away from me. And I wanted to return to the demons, but I was not a demon." 'My heart ached. I was in so much misery it was inflaming every organ in me, making me cough on the smoke, filling my head until I was blind. I felt dirty. I could hear Adam yelling, shouting at me, grabbing the hair he had cut.' "My father said Abel would make an offering to God soon.

“I grew some crops for Him. I knew God did not love me. I was born knowing I was the scum of the Earth, but without the love of the devil or the love of my demon, I was desperate, and I turned now to our Father, praying He would forgive me.” ‘But Lucifer had taught me how to grow those vegetables, long ago.’ “God saw my offering when the day came, and He spat at me. And he praised Abel, who beamed, Abel who knew no suffering.”

“Cain,” Azazel whispered, “please don’t cry. You don’t have to—”

“I was thinking of the demons when I did it! I took a stone, and I was thinking of how demons fight! I wanted to hurt something—! I needed to scream, and I did scream into Abel’s face. He begged me to stop, but I lifted the rock higher. I wasn’t thinking.” ‘I was thinking of being a child, of laughing, of cheering for the demons brawling for fun.’ “I didn’t know. No human had ever died— I didn’t— How could I—? He was my little brother. I thought— It was only after God—” ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ “I touched him.” ‘Why aren’t you moving, brother? Little brother? You’re still little. You fit in my arms.’

Abel’s blood had screamed from the ground, had cried on Cain’s calloused hands.

‘I see.’ Cain had turned up to the sky and screamed at God. ‘I finally realized it then — I was not a demon, after all, nor any divine being. Not me, not Abel, who I could not piece back to life. I was the first man, and I was a killer.’

CHAPTER 34



He didn't care much for the angels. At best, Asmodeus found them amusing; he saw fellow demons attempt to seduce Michael's soldiers stationed among them, giggling and fighting over the most beautiful, most handsome angels. Many came to him for advice — "You're such a darling, lustful demon, after all!" — and Asmodeus humored them.

He said, "Brush against that quiet angel. And drag your claw up his arm. Ask if he can help you move something. Tell him you're delicate because of our cruel, cruel, Father that took your strength when He took your wings." Here, Asmodeus always chuckled, fiddled with his golden walking sticks. "And go ahead and purr in his ear, wrap your tail around his leg. They're all so desperate — the angels. It should be very easy."

For what was quickly becoming four or five weeks of occupation, Asmodeus listened in on the angels arguing amongst each other. He heard: "I saw you, brother, being friendly with a demon!", "What you saw was a demon being friendly with me! And what was I supposed to do?", "Tell him never to touch you!", "Oh, is it a sin now to be touched?", "Do what you want, then, but don't go begging our Lord for forgiveness once you've fallen into their whorish temptations!" Always, Michael snarled for his angels to be quiet, and always,

Asmodeus smothered his laughter. He'd go off, then, tell the demons to continue their pestering of the angels, and they always cooed, "Yes, duke. As you wish, duke."

He didn't often go to war; he was not the warring type. Most of the other demons became acquainted with war in the years following the fall and before Lucifer's sudden wake from his alleged death. 'Supposed death.' But, Asmodeus had spent that time decapitated; even in the arms of the lovely Rosier, it had been miserable immobility and muteness. That there — the forced silence — could be a bridge toward making amends with the devil; Asmodeus could imagine sitting with Lucifer and bonding over a voiceless existence, but he didn't care to. He had no desire to be Satan's friend. It was for that reason, too, that he cared little for all of the ongoing war itself.

One day, he saw angel Azazel again, walking past the river toward Enoch's tribe from somewhere in the east; in his hands, he carried something hefty. Asmodeus had traveled, in deep boredom, to the cliff-sides; and he considered, briefly, to order the angels and demons to capture him, but that would upset Rosier. Tapping a single golden cane, he also caught Michael, walking between some trees and far away from the Watcher. Behind, there were a couple dozen angels and demons — all bloodied, all armored — but neither Baal nor Satan with them. The devil often didn't go to war either.

'He's a monster,' Asmodeus thought. 'He barely commits his own sin, but he inspires it in others.' To Asmodeus, that seemed like cowardice, and then he nearly laughed. 'In that sense, you've indeed become like God.' He flinched, touched his side; it was aching.

At this same moment, the chief prince Michael lifted his gaze, caught the lustful demon watching overhead, but he said nothing of it, instead turning his head and ordering his followers to keep in step. The sun would fall soon, he warned; of this, he was wrong — there were still a few more hours of sunlight, but he was not well acquainted with seasonal changes yet. The archangel urged them each forward, toward one of the hidden entrances into the demon's home, or one of them. Already, Michael had heard of other abodes in distant lands, some still wonderfully unpopulated by humans. Briefly, he reasoned those must have wider entrances than this one, in which he was forced to turn

onto his side and squeeze between two great stones with a shameful grunt. There was a larger entrance higher on the mount, but that would mean encountering Baal, who was often there, and Michael could not think of anything he wanted less.

Breathing in, the archangel rammed himself through, his silver armor scraping furiously against the walls, snapping off portions of the surrounding stone. Michael stepped through the hole, forced wider to accommodate his sheer size. Some gawking noises sounded behind him and nearby but nothing too dramatic; the demons had surely learned now not to coo — like birds for mating — at the chief prince.

A demon, a few weeks prior, had teased, “Oh, Michael, you’re so big and strong; I’d love to see if that’s how you are in—” before Michael grabbed his shoulder and shattered the bones of it in a fist.

The angels, too, knew not to speak to Michael for anything other than affirming orders, this included even Phanuel, who lingered close behind the archangel at all times but didn’t speak to him, though Phanuel didn’t speak to anyone. Gently, that same Phanuel touched his arm now, but Michael hesitated. He moved into the center of a low-roofed cave chamber, illuminated by a single bowl of burning charcoal beside a demon guard, who had turned his head and moved his mouth, counting every angel and demon filtering in. At his back, walls were painted with memories of the dead, enormous beasts whose blood Michael could still remember to be cold, not warm like the humans who’d stood in his way an hour earlier.

“Get some rest,” Michael told the angels. “Tomorrow, we’ll travel to the villages far north. We’ll slaughter any humans who don’t turn against the Watchers with us.” Phanuel’s hand squeezed him a bit tighter. “In the name of God, we will do it.” At this, the demons grumbled and groaned amongst themselves, but the prince cared nothing for it and soon began walking, Phanuel’s touch drifting away. Michael’s old friend wore less armor, wore simple sandals; he was not much of a fighter, more of a disposer of the bodies, particularly after he’d given up chasing Azazel when they first attacked. ‘I still wonder why you came.’ Michael swallowed, ducking his head below some stalactites. ‘And why I allowed you to come.’

Soon, he was hearing carpet beneath his feet and the clinking of his

chains, trekking through one of the many corridors, scrunching his nose immediately at every hint of demonic cooking in the air and infernal sweat and the sound of distant laughter, their chatter. Even still, he reached to remove his helmet and let out a sigh, as if that would be enough to expel the disdain making the ends of his mouth twitch. His hooded eyes began to narrow. Before him, demons were stepping out of his way, hitching up their skirts or grabbing their animals or pressing up against the walls to avoid touching the chief of the archangels. ‘Good.’ The demons went so far as to turn their faces, as if the mere stare of Michael could ignite what was left of their bodies after the fall. ‘Beasts.’

Michael turned a corner, and the quiet was kinder, but the blaring echos of his steps were crueler. Still, this space was far more spacious, a welcome change from all the uniform narrowness of the cave system — he’d never liked enclosed spaces, and since what occurred following the war for Heaven, he could stand them even less. Slowly, he walked past what appeared to be a meadow, spread below a narrow, long gap in the rock above, streaming in some outside light; in between, there were critters and even a few birds flapping about. Satan having offered him a room by this beauty seemed too generous to be true. ‘Lucifer.’ Michael shook his head, instantly, trying to disperse the thought. ‘Lucifer.’ He raised a hand, clammily pushed back some of his dark-brown curls. ‘No. Quiet.’ He almost ground his teeth in frustration. ‘I just don’t understand.’

‘Father, you told me Satan was suffering. Then, what is this garden? How does he suffer? Tell me. Tell me he suffers.’

But he soon found the entrance along the wall into what amounted to a bedroom. It had something of a door, though it was more of a fence made of birk wooden slabs tied to one another and rested against a gape into the cave wall. Michael didn’t hesitate to tug it aside, step in, then pull it over the entrance once again. Surely, this room had been storage for objects and ornaments that needed to be repaired — statues with missing limbs stood upright beside shattered gemstones atop some long tables littered with hammers, screws, and pliers. ‘The broken things room,’ Michael had named it, and Satan had placed him here.

Michael hastily removed his armor as he took the steps needed to

reach the heavily blanketed cot at a corner of the crowded, narrow room, right beside where a bucket of water and a pumice stone lay on the slanted ground. The devil had said Michael would receive no more than one bucket of water a week and all his angels would be similar, which the chief prince had argued against initially but now realized was quite enough. His helmet clanged when it hit the ground, along with his chest piece, the cuisses, the gauntlets — grunting, he stretched his hands here — and the pauldrons on his shoulders. The sword also fell, as did the chains. Without thinking, he gripped the tattered material of his cloak, then took the plain tunic underneath it, and pulled both so harsh over his head that he nearly tore the fabrics. “Ah,” escaped his lips once he was freely nude, brown skin glimmering with pearls of sweat.

Distantly, he could hear shuffling.

Michael touched his body, and he felt his dampness and some blotches of blood that must’ve seeped in between the crevices of armor. Glancing back, he noted the tunic he’d just removed was frighteningly bright red in splatters, so with a sigh, he settled over the ground. He took the pumice stone, dragged the bucket a little closer. ‘Michael, you need at least two angels to help you bathe. Lucifer, what are you saying? You’re just large, is all, and it’ll take me hours to clean you up, but I’ll do it. You don’t have to, Lucifer. I do, I do, let me; I like to touch you; I’d let you touch me too. Touch you where? Anywhere.’ Harsh, he gripped the stone, dunked it in the water, and, without soap, began to scrub it against the crimsoned, dried red patched onto his arms.

“Mmm,” — just a distant noise. Michael ignored it, beginning to drag the rock so rough against one bicep that he was sure he’d rip his skin and watch his own blood intermingle with the lousy, un-divine type of the humans, perhaps his blood would burn theirs away. Cleanse him. “Ah,” came another sound. Michael lifted his head, but he continued, slower. “Baal—” At this, the prince halted. “Mm, yes, there. Right there—” The sweet, rumbling moan shuddered Michael’s heart, and he quickly stood up, dropped the stone, stepped backward, every wet bead dribbling down his body like the drag of a knife. “Ah, ah—” Rhythmic, like Satan had found the perfect melody of pleasure.

Muffled through the cave wall, Baal's laugh was throaty and sneering. "Harder?"

"Deeper," was the reply, and Michael staggered onto the bed, felt it strike against the back of his shins before he tumbled onto it, chest rising, falling. He could barely hear his own breaths, but he felt the blankets at his fingertips, curling forward as he made fists. "Mph! Good. There. Oh, you like that, Baal? It's as tight as you should be holding me. Go on." Michael's hips stuttered up into the air, without meaning to, and he bit so hard on his lip that blood was, surely, drawing but he couldn't tell, not through the haze of vision, the sudden burn on every inch of him, and a hardening coil near his belly. "You're so good for me." Michael's hips twitched once more, uselessly. 'No, no.' He almost kicked, digging an ankle into the bedding. 'Monster, beast!' "You know how to love me."

Michael twisted around onto his stomach — his heavy, tight discomfort pressing against blankets and making his breath hitch, but he dared not move now. This God-forsaken pressure, coaxing him, whining for him to rut like a dog. He shook his head once more, jaw so clenched he was sure his teeth were beginning to crack, fists curled into the sheets once again. "Hngh—" He was in pain, his gut twisting to tear. "Father," Michael prayed. "Father, give me strength. Lord Highest, set in my heart your presence. I am in need. The storms of sin are unrelenting, and I am drowning. Yet, I lift my eyes to you."

"Oh," moaned the devil's voice. "*Michael*—"

At Baal's wicked laughter and Satan's sweet giggling, all the prince could do was bring his curled hand to his mouth and bite down until his knuckles cracked. Bite like a dog. But he did not dare move, dare touch himself, his merciless throb. "Father, Father, Father," he whimpered. "Deliver me from evil. Bring your fist down on the wicked." A final plea in a night that would appear to last an eternity.

But last an eternity it did not, and Asmodeus — duke of lust, fallen angel of friendship, some sort of acquaintance of Baal — heard of this event a few days later. After returning from killing some innocents, Baal had revealed it to him, wheezing between chugs of liquor from a chalice. The two demons were seated on one of a few rows of feather-stuffed couches; ahead of them, there was a simple stage, where a show

bloomed with some song and some sex and some tragic tale. Baal was ignoring it, however, murmuring: "Do you think God lets the angels pleasure themselves? Or does He just watch them squirm whenever they want to fuck? Hump His leg? I wish I could've seen Michael's face."

Asmodeus was grunting, one hand drifting to his left side, touching the silk of his robe. "Why? You want to see the chief prince of Heaven finish? You want to spill over his face, too?"

"After he listened to me fuck Lucifer? Absolutely."

Asmodeus actually chuckled at that, rising from his seat, stumbling because he'd been stubborn in the morning and refused to grab his canes. "Well, I need to go." Quickly, he snatched a handkerchief of peach slices on an unadorned silver tray between them, then slipped it into a pocket. "I have an orgy with my whores," he lied simply. "No, don't come with me." He didn't want to talk to Baal; he didn't want to talk at all.

Baal scoffed. "What's wrong with you? The show isn't over—"

Without another word, the tall demon headed toward, and out, a curtained entrance in the middle of a performance, almost immediately being whistled at by some actors in the corridor. Asmodeus, quickly, tried to step aside, past their purring, but a familiar voice followed him, saying, "Oh, Asmodeus, where are you hurrying to, darling?" A sharp-nailed hand trailed up Asmodeus' spine.

"Gemory," Asmodeus grumbled, "not now." Stumbling to a stop, pushing her away. "You think I already forgot I was angry at you?" Gemory huffed, opened his, her, painted mouth. "Quiet. Why don't you go and fuck Mammon?" In place, Asmodeus wavered; after the fall, many demons had opted for tails to aid their balance, but this hadn't helped him, nor had the horns.

"He doesn't fuck like you," Gemory replied, laughing. "His cock is worthless."

"So is yours," Asmodeus snapped, then readjusting his aching feet. "I want nothing to do with you." He marched away, grimacing, dipping his head. Behind him, Gemory grumbled, to another demon presumably, but Asmodeus heard the mention of Rosier and had to bite his tongue to keep from twisting back and arguing. He was in

enough pain as it was; he needed rest and opium. ‘Opium will fix me.’ When the halls became the most familiar, when he saw the door to his abode, he almost sighed in relief.

Taking the handle, he pulled it open, stepped inside, then stumbled into near darkness. The fireplace was burning but its flame was dim and quiet, and the demon sprawled on the bed was breathing much louder than the fire crackled. Lugging his way closer, Asmodeus saw Rosier’s chest rise and fall with his dreaming sighs. ‘I used to dream.’ Haphazardly, he approached, then flopped onto the mattress. At this, Rosier made a little noise and stirred, but he didn’t resist when Asmodeus wrapped his arms around him and tugged him closer. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“I don’t mind.” Rosier’s voice was soft; it had been that way in the early morning as well, when Asmodeus reached over him to roll some herbs and smoke. “I was just napping.” Asmodeus watched Rosier’s eyes flutter, but not open wide, as he reached to touch Asmodeus’ hair, run his fingers through strands.

“I brought you something.” One of Asmodeus’ hands snaked away from Rosier, reaching into his pocket. “Peaches.”

Distantly, Rosier smiled. “Oh, it’s their season.” He stretched his arms, wiggling away from Asmodeus but not sitting yet. “Thank you. I’ve been so worried that I forgot to pick them.” Rosier still picked them, of course, like he’d never fallen. “Don’t tell me not to worry.”

“I want to know why you were napping.” Asmodeus reached, now, for the peaches, picking one out of the cloth, a tiny slice, then bringing it to Rosier’s lips. “You’ve been sleeping too much recently.”

“I didn’t realize.” Rosier parted his plump lips, just enough for Asmodeus to press the sticking, juicing piece through. Lightly, he felt Rosier’s tongue, ever briefly, graze his fingers, and he listened to the smack of Rosier’s mouth. “Mm.” Asmodeus whispered that he was locking himself away too much, but Rosier didn’t reply. Instead, the ram-horned demon chewed slowly, swallowed, then opened his mouth again. Not hesitating, Asmodeus reached for another slice, fed it to him tender, shifting onto his side and planting his free hand on Rosier’s chest. ‘The demons must’ve bothered you.’ “Mm.” Asmodeus went to feed him yet again, but he found his fingers slipping between the folds

of Rosier's robe, brushing warm, dark skin. Breathing, like Rosier was dreaming once more — "Asmodeus." He parted his clothing, exposing a slice of Rosier like the fruit, like parted wings. With another peach, he dragged a line from Rosier's lower belly, up, up, seeing the demon shudder, arc his back.

When he dragged the sticking fruit slice up Rosier's neck, he allowed it to graze Rosier's lips, watched him open his mouth obediently. But, without warning, Asmodeus suddenly put the peach in his own mouth, chewed with a twisted grin down at his startled friend. Then, he swallowed. Then, he swept down to kiss him fiercely.

Rosier touched him, gasping when the peach-flavored tongue invaded his mouth. Gingerly, he padded Asmodeus' side, felt him stiffen. 'You're in pain.' Rosier had sensed it that morning, and now he tried to slide his hand beneath the drapery on Asmodeus, feel for the stitches. "Asmodeus," he tried to say, but a grunt pressed against his mouth. "Do you need new stitches?" 'Are you rotting?'

'I'm always rotting,' Asmodeus wanted to say, removing himself from over Rosier, then returning to laying on his side. "No." Still, he grunted. "Ugh."

"You're in pain." 'Asmodeus, let me help.' Rosier crawled a little closer. 'I'll find you a new rib. It's probably the rib. It's the one you put into your body yourself. I told you to let me help.' Sighing, he saw that Asmodeus was not moving, though yet another grunt left his mouth, then a groan. "What's wrong?" But he already knew.

"Hurts." The ache was spreading, igniting each cell, and all Asmodeus could do was laugh miserably. 'Every part of me is rotting. Each organ of mine is blackening. I move, and I move the carcass of a hundred different things, and my carcass drags along too. My carcass of a hundred carcasses.' He exhaled coarsely. 'I'm pure rot, and the insects will come to devour me soon.' He shut his eyes, and he remembered Azazel in the woods a few days ago. The Watchers. "Rosier, we should get married."

Rosier managed a little laugh between his worry. "Why?" But he touched Asmodeus' head lightly, fingered his hair. He was thinking of some time ago when the tall demon had shouted in the middle of the night, clutching his makeshift torso like his animal heart had suddenly

burst. ‘Let me die, you screamed. God, kill me. Oh, God, end me already.’ Rosier had simply shaken and then hurried to get him something to drink, some mushrooms to eat, something cold to press to the fevers from infected parts, bubbling green, decomposed skin that would soon need replacement.

“What else are friends for?” Asmodeus chuckled.

And Rosier remembered another time — it came like a memory in a memory. Lucifer saw Asmodeus’ head on his lap, then asked, rather gently, if the fallen angel of fruit wanted to piece Asmodeus back together.

“I do,” Rosier had said.

“Why?” Satan had said.

Rosier had blinked curiously. “What do you mean why? He’s my friend.” Holding the head tighter.

“Fuck,” Asmodeus breathed now, his back arching.

“Do you think,” Rosier had told Lucifer in the memory, “we will return to God, Lucifer?”

“He said He would damn us all, Rosier. We will all burn because of what we’ve done.” But when Rosier hadn’t responded, the devil asked, “Why are you asking this?”

“How long do we have left to live?”

“We will live forever.”

“How long do we have,” Rosier had repeated, “until we burn?”

In the present, Asmodeus felt fingers by his hip; at first, he tensed, but Rosier kept inching his hand closer. He opened his eyes and let a sound seep from his lips, low, deep. He was remembering too: ‘Waking on a bloodied table, like I was a butcher’s dinner, surrounded by the animal bodies I had watched you slice like the peach still in my throat. And your face, Rosier — streaked in red, your eyes squinted, your smile small.’ He had tried to move, but all of him ached, and he’d tried to say Rosier’s name but had wailed, instead, on the day of his re-creation.

Rosier was stroking Asmodeus’ half-stiffness, his hand delicate as he rested a cheek on Asmodeus’ shoulder. ‘I made this, too.’ He squeezed; it pulsed to life. “Can I help?” ‘You can numb pleasure with pain, you can numb pain with pleasure.’ Shutting his eyes, he listened to groans, trying to tug pleased ones out from the aching ones. “I’ll fix

you tomorrow.” ‘If we don’t burn tomorrow.’ He flicked his wrist, pressed a finger to the tip, traced tiny spheres. When Asmodeus kissed him, Rosier happily tasted peach.

‘Forgive me, Rosier. God should have killed me.’

The two demons soon adjusted, and Rosier was on his hands and knees, facing away, and Asmodeus was behind him, hitching up the robe to his hips. Simply, he lowered his face and took hold of Rosier’s softest flesh; gently, he tugged on him so that he could stare at the entrance like he wasn’t sure where it led. He brought his lips closer, kissed him there, danced his mouth there, snaked his tongue inside.

A hitched, strained breath. ‘When you were just a head, I carried you on a sling, and I watched the demons build a home. I watched Lucifer lead them. I watched demons kiss and slither into each other. Like our devil did into Eden.’ Asmodeus — spitting, probing with his fingers, like the first time. ‘I realized that’s what you had wanted to do to me in Heaven. After I re-made you, I asked if that was true, and you wouldn’t look at me.’ Rosier reached for his front but refrained from pleasuring himself. ‘Sometimes,’ he thought, ‘I’m certain I like you inside. Other times, I’m convinced that I don’t. But I know now God made me wrong, long ago. My heart is in all the wrong places. My desire is too far away for me to place.’

Asmodeus grunted and tried to will away the pain, so angry it tensed the nerves in his skull. ‘If you had never met me, Rosier, you would have never met Lucifer. You wouldn’t be here.’ He ate at the sighing Rosier like he’d done with the fruit, eager to chew him up whole but hating himself for it. ‘Do you hate me? You should.’ When he felt Rosier to have lost adequately enough tension, Asmodeus lugged his body back up, and Rosier positioned himself onto his side. Pressing in, he watched himself be consumed, wishing he could disappear entirely into the heat of his friend. ‘Do you wish you’d never met me?’ His own side may have been ripping open, but he pressed just a little deeper. ‘That’s what I wish.’ Asmodeus kissed Rosier’s neck and stayed burrowed there.

Rosier was quiet, he often was in sex, mostly breathing until the occasional higher-pitched sweet noise escaped, like he had them locked somewhere too deep. ‘You fornicated with a thousand demons. I heard

about it from them. And I was beginning to think that this is what demons are, and if I was a demon, I should do as they do. You still slept in the same bed as me each night; I wanted to ensure that nothing tore. You were always tearing. I asked, again, if you wanted to be inside me. You didn't want to answer. I asked if it felt nice — once the terror fell away. You said that it did.' A strangled, pleased cry hitched when Asmodeus moved a hand to tease him from the front.

Asmodeus whispered, "Finish for me. I want to see you finish first."

'I said that if I do it, I want it to be with my best friend.' Rosier shut his eyes; this would go on for many hours; it often did. 'You said you've hurt me. And I told you we're all barreling toward the fire of the end, we're all going to be hurt. And if you've hurt me, I'm happy it was a friend who did.' But once they had done it, *then* and *now*, it was good. Or some of it was good. The intimacy was filling, was warm, was so close to Asmodeus that Rosier lost himself in a way that freed him, however momentarily, of his self, his flesh, the burden of his life.

The finish did come, like the end of time will come.

And they collapsed onto the bed, and Rosier touched what was leaking out from him like blood, though it felt different on his fingers, tasted different when he brought it to his mouth. And it was pale; he had never bled so white. Beside him, Rosier heard a sudden sharp cry in pain, then Asmodeus was doubling over with a proper redness flooding out of his mouth. Gargled, wet, he'd begun to sob. 'I love you,' Rosier thought, struggling to move. 'I don't forgive you.' He was already crawling closer. 'Sometimes I worry our love died up in Heaven, and we've been carrying its corpse for centuries. But I'm nothing without you now.' He touched him. 'And you're nothing without me either, are you?'

But they may have been nothing even together too.

CHAPTER 35



On the trek back home — ‘Is it home?’ — Azazel encountered the remains of a village, straw roofs blown away and blackened by what must’ve been fire. Carcasses — human and animal — laid still both on the ground or on what must’ve been the flooring of the huts — stone mounted on short wooden pegs, though some bent and some broken. Grass crunched dead beneath his sandals, and he approached a goat head, nearly plucked from its body but not entirely. Azazel would have to use his dagger, so he did, listening to the buzz of flies fogging all around. When the angel lowered himself and began to saw at the coarse, matted fur of neck, cutting through flesh enough to watch red splurge onto the ground and his fingers — he was thinking of the city he’d just left behind. He thought of the giants roaming through it, the flowers being adorned on those monsters, the barrels of crop and meat for them.

“They’re happy,” Armoni had said, “that Enoch is gone.” The angel of virtue had been hurrying with him toward the wall, trying to urge him to leave before the men might resort to feeding Azazel to the giants. Soon, after all, they would run out of animals to kill.

Azazel had replied, “I wonder where he’s gone. The angels must be fussing over him in Heaven.”

But as they’d reached the open mouth of the stone wall, Armoni

had adjusted the scarf over his head, taken his friend's hand, then squeezed it. "I'll stay here. I shouldn't leave Miriam, my wife, alone. Also, the men want to host a fertility festival. They're going to place me at the center, and they're going to dress all us Watchers up. And call our seed potent."

A disbelieving laugh, then — "What do you make of that?"

"I didn't realize there was this supposed seed in us at all. I'm not fond of it. But I do like being admired, so I'll keep my complaints to a minimum."

"You're really incapable of love?"

"I think that I love you, Azazel." Azazel had found himself smiling at that. "I love our Dina too. But this seed and this children talk — perhaps I find it too human. Does that make me wrong?"

"There are no wrong ways to love, I believe." They had embraced tight before bidding farewell.

In the present, Azazel finished decapitating the goat, then sheathed his bloodied dagger and slid it back beneath the tie of his tunic at the waist. His hands were clammy and stained as he took the goat's head by what would've been its human cheeks, and he drew it so close that its snout almost poked his nose. 'You're really dead, then,' he thought. 'Where do you go when you die?' It was not the first time he'd seen either a dead or decapitated goat, and yet it struck him hardest now, now that he needed a Father to ask about death. The angel, slowly, rose to stand, the goat head rising with him. 'If only my touch could save you.'

He pulled the goat closer to his chest, began to walk away from this desolate, ruined place. 'What will I do now? The frustration that used to eat at me is gone and now there is just sadness. My Eitan is dead, isn't he? I don't even know when he died. I never should have come to Earth. I've killed the man I love. I gave him the graveyard of my virginity, and now he's died. Must've died inside me. Spilled blood into me and gone limp.' He continued, on his way. 'Everything is dying inside me. I will die inside me too.'

Mount Hermon was far but not far enough. When Azazel returned, he stumbled onto pain persisting. Here, in the woods and by the river, there were slaughtered animals too, though many stripped to

wet bones, likely due to the giants roaming the village silently, peacefully — for now. The angel stared at them from afar for a moment, saying nothing, before he heard the voices of various men, the same way he had when he'd been with Armoni many days ago. The hunters — all of them nearby. With the goat head still with him, Azazel stepped toward the chatter, his heart heavy, took another few steps, a twig snapping beneath. 'What will I do now? I can't return to God, and the devil won't take me. I have no one left that can forgive me.' He lifted the goat head, placed it before his own, and when he moved into a beam of light falling through the canopy above, right before the consulting hunters, the soldiers, he heard them go quiet.

They stared at the angel with the goat head, and Eitan's voice called out, "Azazel, where the fuck have you been?" His voice was rough, scratching from yelling for hours, days. "You disappeared and a giant ate an old woman's son—"

"I want to," Azazel whispered, "teach you more about war." 'If no one can forgive me, then I'll forgive myself.'

"Why the goat head, angel?" asked a boy, too young to stand among soldiers. "What are you doing?"

"The angels and the demons are strong." When his voice trembled, Azazel swallowed, breathed, then spoke once more. "You're going to need the help of the giants. The angels and demons aren't sure how to kill them. We sacrifice an animal to them." He tapped the goat's head with a finger. "Like this goat. Sacrifice a goat to them, like Abel sacrificed his lambs." Azazel shut his eyes for a moment and felt his stomach stir. "We can't win against God, but the angels and the demons are not God, neither are the humans. The least we may be able to do is war to protect ourselves." Eitan was stepping toward him now; the angel recognized the sound of his steps, his breathing. 'Eitan, my poor man. You're dead, and I've killed you.' His face twitched, his heart lurched with an ache that almost pulled it from its place between his lungs. 'But I will resurrect you somehow, and I will protect your family. My family.' He had married him. 'Hurt me if you want but I won't leave you.' The first marriage for love, he had said — until death do us part — but an angel could not die.

Azazel returned home with his husband, then fucked him.

Another month passed. And Baraqiel had just dismissed the Watchers standing before him with just a few fruits and nut spreads and grain. Then, he sighed and turned to stare at the clay-wall homes with flat-wood roofs, along with a hundred huts made of roots hastily built for the refugees of Kokabiel's tribe. 'Children first,' Baraqiel had instructed the angels and was remembering again. 'The children deserve to starve the least.' Yet, he knew there was little he could do to ensure his word was kept, and it made him, angel of light, sigh beneath the dark of near-twilight, beneath the orange-ing leaves of a tree branch, blocking the moon but covering hardly any star. He blinked up at the specs of white. After marrying, he'd told his wife of astrological truths just because he hadn't known what to say after having sex with a woman. She had listened with wonder, though Baraqiel had just been parroting Kokabiel.

Before the war, Baraqiel had hardly spoken, though not out of shyness. There was just a lack of desire to vocalize his thoughts. He hadn't any friends, really. He'd never needed any. 'Kokabiel, where are you?' He walked, listening to the buzzing of night creatures and the bleating of starved cattle. The air was sticking to him, wet and thick. 'Kokabiel.' He must be with his wife. Baraqiel frowned. Before the war, he used to travel to every corner of Heaven and light candles without reason, some tick in him, some compulsion. Something like God on His first day; 'Let there be light.' Baraqiel continued to walk. Before the war, he hadn't been miserable, but he had been quiet. 'Kokabiel?' He stopped, and he listened, staring at the house that he shared with his wife at the end of a dirt path, where Kokabiel and his human family were also sleeping.

As if he had willed it so, an angel stepped out through the open doorway, his smile so bright he was like a saving light at the end of death. Kokabiel — walking with a happy sway, taking Baraqiel's hand, his eyes endless voids, his freckles asking to be traced to remember the night constellations that Baraqiel had told his wife of. When his angel kissed him, Baraqiel remembered how he had been buried inside Kokabiel when the angels attacked his people. And here he was, lips pressed to the same angel amid war. The attacks were increasing, the raids were getting deadlier. Four had died last morn-

ing, six dead the week before that, and ten would die in the next attack.

“He’ll build his ark soon,” Kokabiel murmured against his lips.

Baraqiel listened to the breeze hiss. “Are you sure?”

“Believe in me.”

Before the war, Baraqiel had always wanted to believe in something. No angel can believe in God; you can’t believe in the definite, all-knowing truth before you. Belief only blooms in uncertainty, and Kokabiel was uncertain. “I believe in you.”

In another village, the angels attacked, they quartered the leader, and the demons disemboweled a woman. When a group of hunters appeared, they brought a giant that snapped its mouth on an angel and tore off both his legs. The sun set slow.

And within another month, Samyaza heard — “I’ll die soon.”

The leader of the Watchers lifted his head, tilted it, but his wife was on the hammock, not carrying her child. Her hand was over her swelling, monster pregnancy. Samyaza was crouched on the ground, collecting some bone fragments that their second half-angel child had left while hunting for rodents to eat. His oldest daughter, the same one that named Ohya, named this other giant Hahyah.

Samyaza was now adjusting, standing up, and he opened his mouth — except, his wife spoke again, just as soft and hollow, “I don’t think you could understand as an angel. You don’t know what it feels like to know you’re going to die.”

“What does it feel like?” Samyaza asked; his voice felt wrong, improper. Tepidly, he moved closer, reached, brushed her shoulder. Idith’s hair was a fog, her lips were chapped, and there were distant birds outside, the sprawl of gray clouds. ‘I used to kiss that mouth so often.’ There was the sound of children too, the higher-pitched voices of his daughters and his son and his two giant monsters; they were playing outside.

“Calm.”

Samyaza realized he was quite stiff as he climbed onto the hammock with her, sighing when she twisted around, laid her head on his chest and, without thinking, he touched her hair, the curls. How long had it been since they talked? Days. And since the birth of the

second child, they'd rarely had a conversation. Whenever she climbed on to fuck him, he had laid still and silent. During the day, he spent time with the children and with aiding the people. The hunters often returned harmed now, and Samyaza often saw them bring a giant or two with them, but he never stepped in. Partly, he hoped Ohya would eat one of them. Maybe Eitan.

"Why did you cut your hair?"

Samyaza touched it, the uneven strands, only some threads of black brushing his shoulders but many lingering by his chin. His head felt like it was flying, every turn of his skull lacking each string of weight he'd known for a million, billion, years. 'God, do you have rolls of thread somewhere that you weave the hair of every angel from? Do you have a hidden workshop where you make each angel? How was I born? Is there someone you tangled with to make me?' He swallowed, and then he found himself leaning his light head on top of her own. "I was angry," he decided, "at God, my Father."

"You're like a girl," Idith chuckled, "cutting her hair when she's sixteen." Said with a tenderness Samyaza hadn't known in a year now; how fast time was on Earth, how fleeting. 'I'm going to lose you.' He was beginning to realize it, to understand Idith's warning. 'Your skin is seeping — around your eyes and from your arms, spotting in some places. Will you muddy in my arms and turn into the mud that God made you from?' "Yes. You're just like one. Tired of being beautiful, tired of being innocent." 'And God will one day unspool me into just the star string he made us angels from.' "It feels good to be angry, doesn't it? God wronged you, didn't He?" 'I can imagine it: a golden thread of a dead angel reaching down to the Earth and a dead woman reaching up to Heaven.'

Samyaza did not want to speak of God. "You mentioned you'll die. Why did you say that?" He wanted to say she was being strange, but she had been strange for so long now.

"I can just tell that he wronged you. That you're a girl prepared for independence, and God is a cruel, overprotective father that tells you not to wear revealing clothes or to have so much pride. Why did you ever come to Earth? Did you really love Him that much?"

Samyaza didn't bother trying to recall it now: "I don't know."

"You've cut your hair. If you return, you'll be changed."

"I'm already changed."

"What's different? Tell me about when you were younger. I want to hear that. Have you ever loved someone before me?"

Samyaza opened his mouth, shut it, and he felt her stir then sit up, look down at him with heavy eyes. And instead of speaking of himself, he asked, "How are you? You're not well. Tell me what's wrong." He swallowed. "I love you."

She smiled, gently. "I'm going to die soon. Before storms come, it's always calm, and I feel the most calm I've been in years. I can hear the children laughing, the human ones and the angel ones. It's all such a horror, but living is a horror." Between them, her stomach growled, but there was no shame, no embarrassed cough; instead, her eyes were blissful. "It was all very fun. I had so much fun, in between the pain. It was fun loving you." Samyaza whispered for her to lie down again. "The humans are killing each other. My family will never forgive me. But I hope you pass down my name. Tell them about Idith, the woman that doomed the Earth because she seduced a pretty angel."

"Idith, you didn't seduce me."

"But I hurt you, and I feel like just a young girl too. You and me — girls angry at their fathers enough to hurt themselves and those they love. I do love you, Samyaza. I hope you'll love me, after I'm gone. Even if I was only ever just an old prostitute." Samyaza felt dry, scalding rawness at his throat, his eyes prickling, shaking his head. "But I'm so hungry, and I want to hurt you again."

The angel stared at her, and he confessed: "I did love an angel once."

"Did God punish you for it?"

"I thought that He did." Samyaza remembered the angels cheering out in the streets when angel Raphael had suddenly been anointed alongside archangel Uriel; 'I remember the hollow in my chest, the confusion, after I had been told that it would be me. Had I done something?' "I thought there was something deeply wrong with me. I had disappointed God. And He was punishing me." The angel finally pulled Idith down, and she sank her teeth into his neck, and he breathed out in sweet, miserable pain.

But we return to Azazel again — the angel who was not elected a leader of the Watchers, long ago. Sometime later, he was adjusting a large head covering before he turned his head, leaving a braid or two to tumble down past his shoulder, and looked to Naamah. The young child's wrists were now so thin that the bones were too visible, and their skin was like a drenched cloth, contorting to whatever lay beneath it, the arteries, the joints — all this as Naamah laid on the lofted mat by the hammock, facing one of the walls, so still that the angel might have thought they had died sleeping.

Flinching, Azazel headed toward the door, he saw Eitan's grandmother, who had by now lost so much of her roundness, her cheeks hollowing. And yet still, she smiled when she saw him and greeted, "Angel." He approached her, embraced her. "Oh, something's different about you."

"Do you think so?" Azazel found her warmth troublingly comforting. 'I would have liked to have a grandmother.' He allowed himself to rest his cheek on the hill of her shoulder. 'I can fool myself to think I have a mother, a father, and brothers, even sisters — but not this, here.' He shut his eyes and felt how small she was. 'Perhaps, it all would have been better if I was born a human.' He imagined it: being born with a small body, checking each morning for whether his height had changed, listening to his mother, watching the men from afar, becoming an adolescent, sharing a kiss with another boy. He really would've liked to be a boy, not an angel. "Can you look after Naamah for me? I'm going out to help with the hunt. I hope to come back with food."

The old woman drew away, then smiled sadly, pat his shoulder. "Of course. Please come back with as much as you can. I don't want the giants to eat any of my own."

"Yes." Azazel swallowed the stones lodged in his throat. The second he stepped away, he tugged closer one of his many layers of clothes, wishing he could stay home and curl up with Naamah. He felt heavy, exhausted to the brink of whatever was the angel equivalent of death — falling, perhaps, but he may as well have fallen, so he may as well have been dead. He raised a hand, like he desired to shield himself from the sun, but the skies above were gray and the air was stuck to him, moist

and heavy. It had been like this for a while — he hadn't noticed, and at this moment, he thought little of it. Instead, he watched the light stream from between the clouds, then put down his arm, began to walk, heading toward the forest, trying to will away the sudden barrage of melancholy.

The trees were coming closer, like they were the ones moving toward him, outstretching both hands of theirs, asking for an embrace like Azazel had done to the grandmother of his husband. He saw, too, the group of men lingering around — like there had been the first time he helped them hunt. And like then, Eitan was in his cape, turning around, but there was no gentle smile, no chuckle, or coy compliment. He nodded, then waved an arm for all the men to follow him. Too, he said, "We captured a human from the nomads." Danel's people. "He said that his cousin birthed a giant, but he won't tell us where it is. And he allegedly saw where Michael is hiding."

"Torture," Azazel taught them.

"Will you," said Eitan, "show us how to do it, angel?"

Azazel said, "Yes," and the simple obedience was familiar, like he was with God once again.

Elsewhere, Samyaza left his wife and children, and giants, to go into Enoch's abandoned home when he stumbled upon Noah, one of Enoch's great-grandsons. "Oh—" The man was at the entrance, was stumbling away and holding something behind him. "Noah. Are you alright?"

The wrinkled, slouching man coughed. "I'm alright. Why have you come? Are you going to heal more humans? You really should. There are a few that have been injured already and suffering alone, too scared to ask for you." Samyaza knew he had lost their trust; even from here, he could see a giant roaming between a few homes, grunting, likely hungry.

Samyaza nodded. "Please reassure the humans that I can still heal them." Noah said that he would and quickly scampered away, just as the angel was about to ask what he had been doing. Curiously raising a brow, the Watcher nonetheless stepped inside and touched a table, saw the bowl he'd once regularly used to heal. 'I'll invite humans in for healing. I refuse war. I'm a healer. This is what I'll do.'

Meanwhile, Azazel was facing away from a gurgling, shrieking man. He was beside Eitan, his fingers brushing those of his husband, who stared directly at the torture before them. While the hunters had been about to cut up the man, Azazel had shared that they could place a cloth over his mouth, then dump water onto his face. ‘It’ll burn up his lungs. It’ll kill him without killing him.’

“Let him speak,” Eitan barked, and Azazel heard the wet, throaty cries once the hunters had torn the gag off their victim. No words, however, left him, and Eitan groaned when the tortured audibly spasmed against the branches and dirt, then a rush of what must have been bile downpoured. “Motherfucker. We wouldn’t have to do this if you tell us where your cousin’s giant is. And where Michael is.”

“Don’t hurt her—” the victim managed. “Please don’t hurt her. She hasn’t been well. Please.” Every syllable drawn out was harsh enough to grate bloody on ears.

Azazel couldn’t help but grimace, and *plop* — a tiny droplet landed on the tip of his nose. He frowned at this at the same time he felt Eitan’s hand draw away from his own, only to come and rest on his long back. In too intimate a gesture for a backdrop of violence. Immediately, the angel tensed and he parted his lips to tell Eitan to focus on the torture, but his touch was becoming a slow, sensual rub with squeezes all along. Heart stuttering, then picking up, trembling, Azazel’s gaze flickered frantically to the scene before him, to his husband beside him. The hunters grabbed their victim by the hair and shouted just as Eitan raised his grip, slipped it beneath the collar of Azazel’s robe and tunic.

‘Fondling. Screams of pain.’ The angel was trembling. ‘Like war. Like the war for Heaven. Death, violence, and fucking violence. When I fucked, I died in the eyes of God. Fucking and dying, the two heads of one body. War.’ He could tolerate it no longer, shoving Eitan’s hand away, stammering, staggering backward, and seeing the man’s face twist so tight that Azazel thought it would spin the entire world with him.

“Azazel,” he called, but he sounded like God.

Furiously, the angel shook his head and hurried away, deeper into the forestry, needing to breathe, realizing this had happened before. He had run away like this. ‘Stop. Stop,’ he wanted to shout. ‘Stop all of

this, God! You've taken away my husband's love! He has become like you!' He remembered what Cain had said, of how he had lost his mind after loving a demon. 'Even fucking him isn't healing him! I'm giving him what he wants! Sex and war! And it's not enough! What do I do?!' But even if the beats of his sandals on the ground were booming, he heard a noise up ahead, then saw a little light, wavering like fire, like sea.

Water was really beginning to trickle now, tapping away at his body, sinking into his clothes, his skin, as he slowed, found himself by a clearing, seeing a man. Kneeled, the elder clutched the ground, his head low, his body curled. He did this before a tall stone where a figure stood. At the sight of him, Azazel stopped, touched some bark, hid behind it, and suppressed a gasp. There was nothing he could do but watch the terrified man, Noah, and this brilliant angel about to speak to him; he could do nothing but listen in horror when Dina opened his mouth and spoke in a voice like God's:

"I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am going to bring floodwaters on the earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on Earth will perish."

CHAPTER 36



With just a blade of grass, the angel Gabriel entertained himself, twiddling the green between his fingers, wrapping it tight around one until his flesh pinked, then reddened, beneath the strain. When it began to ache, he stopped. Gabriel didn't want to hurt himself; he belonged to God, and he wouldn't want to hurt what belonged to God. Only God had the right to hurt him. With that feeling, he lifted his gaze at the perfect moment — Uriel landed on the ground some steps away, steps that Gabriel soon took. “Uriel—” He approached hastily, but the other didn't look to him, the stern prince staring straight.

“What is it, Gabriel?” Voice tight.

They were moving along and in between hills, heading toward the limestone house at the end of the way — the northernmost point in Heaven. “You must speak to God with me.”

“I have nothing to say to Him.”

“He cannot— He shouldn't do this.”

“God can do anything. Or are you losing faith in His might?” Uriel still refused to look at him. “You'll be the next one to be cast down if you continue with your disobedience, Gabriel.”

“Is it disobedient just to speak to Him?” Gabriel couldn't stop himself; he reached, took the upper arm of the taller one, and Uriel

jerked to a stop at this, just some steps before the golden door, which had once been ornate with blinking stars but was now bent in various places, turned disfigured constellations; during the war, it must have been attacked. ‘I can imagine the angels beating the door, then forcing their way in, grabbing you.’ Though Gabriel couldn’t remember much of the war; he had been fading in and out of darkness; the mere memory of that was nearly enough to make him frown. He knew now death, and that had been a taste of it. “Uriel. You can’t possibly have no problem with this. What will we tell the other angels? They’re already throwing each other on the streets. Another war could be upon us!”

“There will be no other war in Heaven for the rest of eternity, and the other angels have never cared about the humans.”

“But the Watchers—” Gabriel cut off his own words, choosing instead to grip Uriel tighter as if that would be enough to force some empathy. “How can God do this? He’s good. He’s merciful. How can He threaten to hurt so many?”

“Before all things, God is powerful, and if you think Him incapable of atrocity, then you think Him as something less than a god.” Uriel walked a beat of silence, then snorted. “Perhaps, you think of Him as a mere angel like yourself.”

Gabriel swallowed, but he didn’t allow Uriel to rile him. “I heard it was Enoch who gave Him the idea. Enoch and Him have been inseparable, so I’m certain it’s true.” He began to frown. “Do you really think all the humans are as wicked as he says?” He loosened his hold, then allowed his hand to drift away, to fall back down to his side. “Why is this all happening? I’m afraid, Uriel.”

“If there is one thing Satan has done,” Uriel murmured, “it’s taught all the humans and the angels to fear God.” God needed something to invoke wrath, to invoke fear. “I have a question for you now.” Gabriel murmured that he could ask anything of him. “Were you there when the Lord told Michael to return Satan to us?”

Gabriel’s frown only deepened. “It can’t be true, can it?”

“With this flood and promise of destruction,” Uriel replied quietly, “one can’t help but wonder why the Lord didn’t destroy Lucifer on that day.” The name was almost enough to make Gabriel flinch. “When Raphael visited Earth, he saw that Michael was working along-

side the devil. I assume he told you too.” Of course, Raphael had flown into Gabriel’s home with a sudden swoop, only to stumble and fall right over him. Hitting the ground, Gabriel had laid there pinned, eyes wide as Raphael hurriedly planted his arms on the floor and lifted the front of his body. Stammering, he told Gabriel everything he’d seen. “And now I can only wonder what exact orders God has given Michael and why Satan has been allowed to roam free for so long.”

Gabriel, still thinking of Raphael shaking him, his face contorted in a distress he’d never seen the likes of, asked, “What are you implying?”

But the door before them was suddenly creaking as it was pulled open in a slow creep. The angel revealed at the other side startled, then quickly bowed his head and greeted, “Uriel.” Over Dina’s hair, there was a lace scarf as pale as the long tunic on him; Uriel and Gabriel were dressed similarly. “I didn’t think you’d be back so soon— I’m not done cleaning.”

Uriel waved a hand, some irritated twitching at his mouth. “I told you that you didn’t have to.” He then said to Gabriel: “I won’t be doing something as asinine as asking Father for mercy on humans. They have sown the seeds of their own obliteration, and we must do as He says.” He stepped forward, and Dina quickly stepped aside, far from the door, like he couldn’t stand too close or risk burning. “I will speak with you and Raphael about Michael another time.”

“Ever since you’ve taken in Dina,” Gabriel whispered just as he felt Uriel about to leave him, “you’ve become even angrier.”

“I never asked to be left in charge of an angel.”

Dina could still hear this from his place a few steps from the entrance, but he looked away, to one of the many towering walls of knowledge — manuscripts, scrolls, codices, and tablets — and he touched it, thinking he would clean this next. Perhaps he was the angel of cleaning; ‘I hope so.’ He chose to walk away, listening to the princes murmuring. ‘I’ll make some tea for them, so that they can sit and talk.’ He wanted to be helpful.

Dina had been banished from his home, after all, as many of the forgiven angels had when word reached Heaven that the Watchers had spoiled themselves with humans. Heaven had needed someone to blame, and though the archangels ordered for peace, some sinners now

had nowhere to live. It was at God's instruction that Uriel took in Dina, though the youngest angel had no clue why. 'Am I a budding angel of wisdom, Lord? I'm too tainted with sin for that.' He picked at a nail, just to draw some pain and return to reality, though he remembered the hands that had grabbed him, tore him out of bed, and flung him out to be yelled at for what the Watchers had done. 'Maybe I'm the angel of sin.' He missed Azazel and Armoni.

That Azazel was still on Earth, though he'd heard of the end. After he'd hurried away, he discovered again the men, stumbled onto his glowering husband, and stared at him with wide eyes, new forbidden knowledge caught in his throat that he didn't know whether to share this time. Eitan had approached him, snapping, "You— There you are." In his chest, the angel's heart continued to beat and beat, thudding as if its own legs were on the ground, carrying it in a sprint. "Are you going to run off again?" Azazel parted his lips, but his gaze had tilted, and he caught the man that had been tortured — now with a gash across his throat, eyes wide enough they might pop out from his head. Red in rivulets onto his bare, haired chest — flooding him. Eitan, though his voice sounded too dim for where he was, began to say that they would all be attacking a village nearby; they would take the food or they would take two humans and make, of them, food. And when the men around him cheered, Azazel heard the echo of Dina's words in his skull — flood, end of all things.

He knew that he should not speak of the flood here.

Instead, he waited until night fell, down like an angel from Heaven, until after he had watched the ordered attack from afar and said nothing when the humans were roasted. He waited, even, until he had arrived home, until he had pulled on something warmer to combat the suddenly harsh wind, waiting in a certain terror that continued to grow wider within him, hungrier. Each drop of rain pelleted on the hut's roof overhead, some tears of the sky seeping in. 'Is this it? Is this the end already, God?' No, surely not, for God had instructed Noah to build an ark somewhere, and he would need time to do so.' Yes. Noah. 'There is time.' He nearly grasped that hope with both hands. 'There is time.' Sat on the bed beside the standing angel, Eitan was grunting, removing his cloak, scratching his overgrowing beard.

“Angel,” he said.

“Man,” replied Azazel, not looking at him.

“What is wrong with you?” When the angel didn’t reply, Eitan continued, “You’re acting strange. Didn’t you teach us war? Don’t you want us to partake in it?”

“War does not feel the same when you do it,” Azazel whispered. “I’m not certain why. Maybe it’s because you have children and elders. I don’t know—” He stiffened when Eitan managed to reach him from his seat, a rough hand coming over his arm. “Don’t touch me right now, Eitan. Please.”

“What, don’t you want to fuck me anymore? Don’t you love me anymore?”

“*I never should have loved you!*” Azazel shouted so loud that even he shuddered in surprise and disbelief. “Never. I—” A sick boil of pain smoked out through his mouth and dared to speak yet again: “I never should have fallen in love with a thing that dies!” Azazel will remember the look on Eitan’s face, the flicker in his widened eyes, the part of his mouth, for the rest of eternity. “I never should have loved a man who has long ago died and been replaced by you. You beast!”

The silence in between them was empty, hardly a noise of night in between, hardly a breath. But Eitan wasn’t responding, some realization in his face, something that did not leave his mouth. ‘What?’ the angel thought. ‘Aren’t you going to argue against me?’ The man simply continued to stare. ‘You are so dead, you can’t even bother to care for me now?’ Shakily, Azazel stepped toward the hammock, climbed with an unfamiliar heaviness in his gut. Waiting, waiting, but no other word left Eitan’s mouth, only the creak of the bed as he turned over — and soon Azazel realized that, before him, the darkness of night was being eaten by the darkness of dream.

For the following days, the two didn’t speak much to each other.

Azazel, however, despised the relief he felt. If he loved Eitan, he should be missing him, but now everything was wrong, and he kept remembering Cain’s story. ‘I see neither staying or abandoning love will mend it now. The Earth will flood because of what I’ve done.’ He should tell Samyaza, but what would Samyaza do? He should tell Armoni, but what would Armoni do? What can there be done when

doom is promised? Ignore it? Fight it? The only organ in Azazel's body was, suddenly, hopelessness in the diorama of a heart.

Still, he did not lock himself away. The angel had taught the men this war, and he couldn't forget why he had. As he stepped out each morning with Eitan, he passed by skinnier and skinnier people, some having resorted to begging now. Some Watchers, angels, saw Azazel, but only warily, suspiciously — a sinner leading sinners. As the men led raids, Azazel kept watch overhead in the sky, ensuring there were no signs of demons, angels, or foreigners. At the same time, he squinted for signs of Noah and this alleged ark. Below, Eitan and his hunters attacked some men from another tribe who, surely, were aligned with Michael. Surely. Azazel's heart was in a frustrated, ugly turmoil; below, spears cut a man open and revealed something almost angelic but not. A boy sent him a goat to kill.

An ark. A flood. A war that was, Azazel was sure, just and forgivable — 'I won't ever stop thinking in the language of forgiveness, will I?' — at least for now.

A gloomy sunset. This one came a week later, beneath a gray sky, as Azazel stared at yet another razed crop field from beside some crying women. Just a minute or two that Azazel had taken to step away from the men, but his heart felt heavy and was growing heavier, and he touched his body only to shudder. He, then, realized with yet another horror that he was feeling a deep abdominal ache. 'No, no, no.' He staggered. 'Not this.' He searched all about, but there was only misery left in this place. A thin cow cut on the ground, being hacked by a man with a thin son at his side. Monsters, giants, lingering around and groaning in hunger, their bristling bodies the size of the huts. Some Watchers with them. Something decomposing and crawling up his nose. Flies. The sound of an infant screeching, somewhere.

"Please." Azazel found himself walking toward home, knowing there was no choice but to speak to Eitan because if he was dying he, at least, didn't want to be alone. Azazel's feet stumbled, and a certain pang of pain struck; he grimaced and felt all his skin pull. 'No. I shouldn't. He will ask why I'm feeling this way. Aren't I a man? A proper man?' There was crying again, but this time from something older than an infant, and Azazel turned. Far ahead, at the largest house, where Enoch

had once been, Samyaza was at the door, speaking to a grandfather and his teenage grandchild, who was weeping into her hands. Without hesitating, Azazel moved toward them, hearing that the girl was overwhelmed with sadness but ultimately happy that Samyaza had healed her. When they saw Azazel approach, the humans appeared in an abrupt hurry to leave, the grandfather tugging, dragging, along the girl.

“Samyaza—” Azazel called Samyaza’s attention, and the leader of the Watchers tilted his head to him, opened his mouth, then stopped. “Samyaza, help me—”

Samyaza’s eyes quickly softened. “Azazel, what’s wrong?” He staggered — he wore no more than a tied cloth from his waist down — when Azazel fell onto his chest, but quickly, Samyaza put an arm around him, guiding him into the home. “Azazel?” There was an urgency, and worry, that Azazel wasn’t accustomed to in Samyaza’s voice. Was that care? Did Samyaza dare care for him now? “No, don’t fall.” Samyaza had once berated Azazel for falling onto the ground of a temple. “Let me help you onto the bed.” The world had become a haze, a fog so thick that he could hardly see, but Azazel felt the bedsheets suddenly on his back, as he fell like downpour. “Azazel.”

Sharp, the angel breathed, and he realized the world had begun to teeter, and his body was warm, too warm. “Brother.” He wasn’t sure why he said it. “Brother, help me.” He was blinking rapidly, trying to ward off what felt to be a fire there, leaking down from his pupils. “I’m dying.” A choke made him twitch where he was. “God hates me. God hates us all.”

“Azazel, look at me.”

“I’m looking at you.” But Samyaza’s hands still took his cheeks, and they were wonderfully cold. “I’m,” he sighed, softly, “looking at you.” He was — Samyaza’s furrowed, worried brow, the downward tilt to his lips, the beauty mark kissed by his left eye. “You’ve cut your hair.” A trembling hand lifted, touched Samyaza’s fingers. “God will never forgive you.”

“I don’t want His forgiveness.” Samyaza said it gravely; ‘God’s mercy means nothing to me now, but yours is everything.’ “Tell me what’s wrong, Azazel. Are you hurt?”

Azazel swallowed, and he licked his dried lips, and then he shut his

eyes. "I'm tired." It was true. "And everything is wrong. My body." He clutched his clothes tight. "This body is hurting me. I want to escape it." Samyaza's hands began to drift away. "I want everything to stop." He clenched his eyes shut, and then, for no reason at all, whispered, "I have a lot to tell you." He felt a dip of weight on his side, and it was largely quiet, and when Azazel opened his eyes again, it was a little dimmer. The sun was setting, night was coming, and he was tired. "I have a lot to tell you, my friend."

Samyaza was sitting beside him. Grunting, he lowered onto his side, beside Azazel. "We haven't talked in so long." He pressed his face against Azazel's shoulder. "So long you've forgotten you hate me."

"I did forget." Azazel appreciated the closeness, and he reached to touch Samyaza's chest. "Will you forget you hate me too?"

"I've never hated you, Azazel." But Azazel didn't reply. "Sleep."

"Stay with me. In case I need you."

"I was about to return to my home."

"Please."

Azazel imagined Heaven, and he closed his eyes for good. Samyaza, here, curled up at his side, and Azazel allowed for some air to skitter into his mouth. He thought to sleep, then tell his friend what he had heard, that he'd been keeping to himself, frightened of the deluge of death spilling out of his mouth the moment he parted it and spoke a word of the end. But when he dreamt, he dreamt of water, falling down his throat, boiling lungs. Why was it that water burned? Why had God made the world from fire, then enshrouded it all in a sea? Lied to all His creation.

Hesitant to touch him, Samyaza lay instead, shutting his eyes, thinking he would only nap. He hadn't meant to dream, as well, especially anything that he would instantly forget as he woke beneath the streams of light trickling through the open doorway like rain. His legs were tangled with Azazel, who had slept without adjusting his hair first or putting on a lighter tunic and seemed as beautiful at dawn as Samyaza had thought when he saw Azazel for the first time. Angel of dawn.

Climbing off, Samyaza thought of his wife and decided to hurry away, though not without tucking a blanket over the other angel first.

There was something wrong; Samyaza could feel it in the humidity, in the sudden fluttering of his heart, the overhang of the dark clouds, a little lower than he'd like. He made a face at them, something rather juvenile for how ancient he was feeling these past weeks, as he crossed the village, stopping just as he neared the hut where his wife was. He saw his two children, the giant ones, gnawing on branches and crouching outside. Samyaza's face twitched, but he decided not to speak a word to these terrible monsters.

Continuing toward the hut, the angel stepped inside, smiling lithely at his wife, in the shadowed corner where the bed was. She weakly smiled back; Samyaza barely saw it, but he made his way toward her and kissed her face. He opened his mouth, but her voice was the one that filled the air: "Angel. I'm sorry."

Samyaza settled beside her, pulled her close, and ignored the belly between them. "For what?"

She chuckled. "I've hurt you."

The human children were out, with their grandparents perhaps, and Samyaza remembered the night his wife had forced him to sleep with her, but he shook his head. "You're a human. You can't really hurt me." But she stared at him. "And it didn't hurt. There's nothing—Idith?" Heavier, heavier, she was growing limp in his arms. "What's wrong?" Slumping against him. He raised a brow, trying to see through the daybreak. Her skin was too white, her form too frail, and there was growing wetness on Samyaza's lap, trickling down both their legs. In the stream of morning, Idith whispered Samyaza's name one final time, then she shut her eyes, and blood burst out of her stomach and flooded.

The flood was so quick that the angel had no time to save her, left to scream over the dead, infant monster falling onto the ground and the remains of his wife over his hands.

CHAPTER 37



“Does war end?” The devil’s voice was quiet, falling like a trickle. “That’s what you’d like to ask me, isn’t it?”

Michael lingered at the doorway, his back facing Satan, and exhaled slow through his nostrils. Cold and damp, the air felt loose around him, whereas the quiet pelleting of rain was nearby. He hadn’t realized he was so near an exit out of the demons’ abode, but if he could hear the weather, then surely he must be. Months now he had spent in the caves, living among the damned, but he couldn’t quite memorize the tunnels, the body of this cold abyss. “There is nothing I want to ask you.” And yet still, the chief prince stepped backward and shifted, looking back at the same Satan he had, only seconds ago, seen then tried to turn away from. “Nothing.”

The beautiful demon remained on the velvet sofa, pipe in one delicate hand. It was primarily of wood and ivory, though it had been engraved with diverse floral patterns. When Michael had walked in, Satan had it between swollen, moist lips, but now he simply played with it; beside him and over a long stone table with a red mantle, a glass opium lamp was still burning. It was the only lighting, apart from two faraway torches at the other end of this long corridor-like room, illuminating a muraled wall. Except these paintings were not like the others

Michael had seen in the mountain; they were simpler; they were animal-shaped smears.

"I'll answer you," Lucifer replied as if Michael had affirmed him. "I've been fighting the first war every day since I declared it. Because of that—" the dancing flame weaved a shadow onto one side of his face "—I think war has no end. You begin to fight, one day, and you never stop."

For once, Michael was out of his armor. He wore only a tunic, form-fitting but long, cotton and embroidered at the hem; the style of it was quite that of old Heaven. "What are you doing here?" He didn't know why he asked it, as if Satan were the intruder. Gingerly, the prince touched his clothing, the cotton weaving too familiar. 'You demons persist with our old angelic traditions, despite all your words of re-creation.'

"I'm just taking some time to think. I suppose you're lost?" Satan twirled his pipe, then he set it down on the table beside him. Behind Michael, the curtain that he'd stepped through to enter the room brushed his back, and glancing downward, he caught a snake creeping along between his feet, approaching Satan. It hissed once it'd made its way up to the sofa, climbed up onto the backrest, then rested there, thin pupils on the angel. "You hardly speak now, it seems."

Michael swallowed what must've been a dagger. "What is there to say?" He was staring at Satan's clothing — the long-sleeved, violet, billowy tunic with an embroidered collar and sleeves, as well as the plunged neckline, exposing his chest and the plethora of jewels and chains that adorned him. His flaxen hair was braided with some leaves and an assortment of muted flowers, whereas his forehead bared a golden, ornate chain, not unlike a crown. Tensed, he noted Satan's empty expression, eyes almost dazed, shadowed as if by the candle as well.

"I heard from Baal that you killed the wife of a Watcher before his very eyes."

"Danel, angel of the sun." 'I remember him kicking and flapping his wings in the arms of Phanuel, useless and sick.' "I was holding her up in the air." 'I could hear Baal laughing as he grappled with a giant, Danel's child.' "I could have ripped off her limbs. I could have cut her

at the front and let her intestines drip onto Danel's face. But I was merciful, and I tore off her head as fast as I could." "Danel screamed so loud that Phanuel lost hold of him, but when Danel went to grab me, I let the body of his wife fall.'

"Did it make you feel good, Michael?"

"I didn't feel anything." 'Danel was pathetic and broken down, taking the body of his weak lover and screaming some more. Did he think her soul would return from the abyss if he cried enough for it? Did he think God could forgive him now?' "The stalking demons told me that she had become as much of a monster in her last weeks alive as her children. Danel was lying to himself. She had already died."

"So you were desecrating a corpse?"

"What do you care about desecration?"

Lucifer leaned back, eyes and mouth still betraying nothing. "You think I care?" Michael swallowed, realizing then that his shoulders were painfully stiff and raised. "I'm the one who taught you about war when your Father couldn't."

"Our Father."

"Right. Our Father, our brothers. One giant, beautiful, happy family."

Michael's nose scrunched, his eyes narrowed, and he found himself twisting around again, saying, "There's really nothing I ever want to say to a beast like you." But he stopped, hadn't completed his turn, eyes catching those strange murals again. What was Lucifer doing here? 'Not Lucifer. He's Satan.' What was Satan doing here? "Why aren't you—" He began that sentence wrong, so he began again. "What is this room?"

"For now, it's a spare room where I like to sleep, but in all our caves' existence, plenty of things have lived here. For a while, Baal did. He carved it out — that's why it's so oddly shaped. It was empty for a long time after that. Then, some chimpanzees started to walk on two legs and grunt. Like any other animals, I allowed them in. I welcomed them. A tribe came by once, and I taught them fire. When they found that wall, I offered them paint and they made that masterpiece. It's very sweet, isn't it?" Michael didn't respond, didn't think. "I never would have imagined that God would choose those happy little animals one

day and disfigure them into a divine creature. Though, after Eden, I did allow in a human child and let him sleep in here. A little boy.”

“Did you eat him too?” Michael was remembering Satan devouring a man’s heart.

“Of course I did. But it was difficult. I grew very fond of him.” His words, strangely, softer. “And Baal did too.”

“Baal.” Michael merely grunted it.

“Baal is such a good demon, isn’t he? He works well alongside you. He’s strong, and he never hesitates. For a demon, he’s quite brave to stand against God and His angels.”

Michael’s nails had already begun digging crescents into his palms. “Baal is mindless—” His brow furrowing, the exhale through his mouth coming out harsh.

“And he knows how to love me” — Lucifer now smiled, wide enough for a twisted giggle to seep through like a flower bloomed between the cracks of a stone — “the way I need to be loved. The way I like.” His head fell into a tilt, carnivorously coy. “While you, oh, *you*, Michael,” Lucifer began, the chief archangel feeling his muscles tense because of that detestably saccharine voice, “what about you? Where have you been all this time?” Then, Michael watched with a certain terror as the devil, slow, lifted his body gracefully and put one bare foot before the other, moving toward him. “I’ve been curious.”

Unable to resist, like succumbing to death — “I thought you knew everything, devil.”

Lucifer giggled once more, and it was almost worse to Michael than if he’d snarled. It stirred something in him, dislodged a dagger in his chest. “I just want to hear from you. All this time you’ve spent here on Earth now, even living among us demons, in my home, and you haven’t properly spoken with your host. Why don’t you sit, smoke with me, and talk?” But he kept approaching. “Or are you scared of me?”

“I said that I have nothing to say to you.” Michael couldn’t bear to look at him now, staring at the faraway wall, where the humans before God’s divine hand blessed them, painted.

“You won’t even speak to me of what Heaven has become, without Lucifer’s shine and glow?” Michael could only clench his teeth. “Is it happier now, Michael? Are you happy?” Another step forward, and the

prince nearly flinched when a gust of lavender crept onto him, the smell of the devil, like flowers, like honey, vanilla, chamomile, then the sweet sound of his sigh — Michael's knees almost buckled, his rage almost inflamed him. Why was he resisting shivers as if he were cold? 'He's going to touch me.' His heart was beating too fast, rocking each bone. 'The devil's rotten hands on me.' 'Michael, come with me and dance. I missed you. You were gone so long.' 'If he touches me, I'll crumble.'

"Heaven is better now without you," Michael said through grit teeth. "We all worship God."

"Another angel of worship must've taken the place of Lucifer," said the devil. "Even the Lord's favorite angel can be replaced with another." Snickering, taking a final step, and now their faces were far too close, and Michael's chest was tight enough to begin tearing, the smell of Satan overbearing, every feature on his perfect face horrifically beautiful, curved, plump, lively. "But Lucifer will always be the first, the first favorite, the first angel God ever loved so ardently."

'The first angel I ever loved.' The thought came from nowhere, or perhaps somewhere so deep in Michael that he thought lost, an abyss of feeling he had tried to fill with dirt, to bury. "God will destroy you." 'If you touch me, I will break.' "God despises you." 'Is your touch still the same?' The pit of his stomach, knotting. 'Just your fingers, brush them on me and my skin will come off.'

"Is that what He told you? Is that God's plan? To destroy a poor, sweet girl like me?" Satan laughed at his words, or perhaps at Michael's scowl. "Do you believe your Father? Do you really think God hates me? If He did, then why did He ask you to bring me back to Heaven?" Michael bit his tongue; he wanted to say the Lord never said those words, had never ordered for his chief prince to drag the devil home. "You want to lie to me." Lucifer's voice, then falling into a harsh whisper — "But you can't, you pure, honest angel."

Michael wanted to scream, '*Get out of my head.*' His blood was heating, scalding his skin from the inside.

But the devil did not stop: "If God has really forsaken me, then why hasn't He destroyed me? If God hates me, then why did He deliver the Earth to me? Why did He gift me a world of my own to rule? Why

does He only watch me kill and eat and maim His supposedly beloved humans? Hate me, you say? Oh, but God is so *loving*, Michael. He sees me, and He loves me. He loves me even more now. He watches me tempt His creation with sick pleasure; I will always be His favorite.” ‘Get your hands off of me,’ Michael pleaded, but Lucifer wasn’t touching him; he had to throw him off, but it was only the devil’s warm breath brushing his face, his lips. Satan blinked those golden eyes, and then added, quieter like he could lower his voice enough for God not to hear, “And whatever He did to you to make you the way you are now, He took great pleasure in that too.”

Michael could not stop himself now, had to tear away from him, had to silence him for good, had to gut him — surging forward, one hand speared toward his throat, the other taking one wrist and pinning it to the wall, pinning Lucifer’s hips to that long table with his own. *Clang* — the pipe fell and the lamp with it, then a sharp shatter, as the fire simmered in an instant, but it didn’t plunge them into darkness how Michael desired. Instead, Lucifer’s beauty was now right before him, reflecting the light of the distant torches, and the shadows on him had merely grown heavier. “Quiet,” came a snarl from between his lips, hardly in Michael’s voice. “Lord rebuke you!” The hand at Satan’s neck was dripping oil from the lamp.

Lucifer bared his teeth, thrashing instantly, his restrained hand clawing at the air, both legs kicking out, slamming hard onto Michael’s thighs, then digging his bare heels into the back of them. “Coward. Look at you, at His feet like a dog.” The devil’s free hand reached, grabbed the chief archangel’s curls, yanked so hard he might rip out a fist of hair, but nothing tore except a breath from Michael’s mouth. “And even still,” Satan seethed, “you are not His favorite. Do all that He says, Michael, and see how He will never love you no matter your offering. Sacrifice your body, or your blood, your voice, or even your soul — it will all be worthless. God will never love you enough to stop hurting you.”

“Beast!” Michael shouted, but Lucifer’s legs were forced apart as he remained pinned against the wall and the narrow, long table, and the chief prince had moved between them, still holding firm that gorgeous throat. Aching, the chains and stones of jewelry engraved onto his

palm. "You liar, you wicked sinner! It's your fault. All the evil of the world is because of you!" He had to kill him. 'You're as beautiful as I remembered.' "It's you who's the destroyer of paradise. God has learned wrath because of you."

The devil laughed, low and cruel. "Do you really believe that?" He kicked out again, began thrashing again. "Your Father has always been a monster." Michael rocked his hips forward, trapping Lucifer from squirming much more, but as he did, the beautiful demon's breath hitched high, and a certain pulse below Michael's stomach pressed, soon, against his lower belly. "And you— You're just a pig to him." Satan spat the words out, then hesitated. "A hard pig. I see that you did miss me, after all." 'I need to kill him. You monster. Get out of me. Get your sin out of my body.' "Oh, and it's as pathetic as I remember. You'd have better luck fucking me with your sword." He kicked out. "It's too bad you don't have it with you." 'I'll kill you.' "You could've killed me so romantically." 'Get out of me! Get out of my head!'

Furious enough his head ached, Michael surged forward once more, opening his mouth, removing his hand, biting down hard on the same throat he had tasted once so very long ago. This time, Lucifer cried out, thrashing as his skin tore beneath the pierce of the prince, both his hands taking Michael's shoulders, slapping, scratching, but Michael met it with his own clawing. He seized Lucifer's soft tunic, pulled harsh enough that it fell to pool at his hips, just as the bottom hem was riding up; it was sweetly embroidered, like the clothes of old Heaven. Like angel Lucifer was here, before him, smiling innocently between their pecking kisses, opening his arms to him, pulling him into an embrace, saying, 'Michael, Michael, Michael.' The prince gnawed on him relentlessly, throwing out bite after bite, wanting to burrow his mouth into him. 'If you're going to be inside me, then I'll be inside you too. Devil.'

Lucifer hissed, "Bastard. Damn you. My demons will rip you to pieces." But Michael had begun rocking his hips forward, bumping against him. "I hate you. I hate all of you angels." But he was parting his legs some more, raising his feet so that Michael could grind easier against him, against the way in. 'In towards what? Damnation?' He scratched at his back, and the chief prince realized — felt his wings

probe out by instinct — he and Lucifer had been like this before, the senseless, hard rubbing. It had felt like hands creating warmth before, but now it felt like a plow striking the Earth over and over, trying to make a dent. “You’re pathetic.” Michael told himself to stop, his mouth hot with blood, tasting like jewelry, his gaze darkening, Lucifer’s hair like a halo. ‘Angel Lucifer, his sweet noises, if only I had allowed myself to part him, to explore the only pieces of him I never kissed.’ “You won’t— You won’t even fuck me.” Michael’s hips were slamming into him now, moving as if on their own, not at all steady but unpredictable and wild. The heat in between them was like the scorch of a sun, and the growing damp of their thin clothes was like the bank of a shore, hard rocks, moist at the touch. Whereas the dribble of red from Michael’s lips was like the first trickles of rain, deluge.

“Beast.”

“Beast fucker.”

Michael reached and, with a bloodied hand, some oil lingering from the lamp still, he snaked beneath the tunic and pressed two thick, large fingers through flesh. And it was like all of hell — hot and tight — inside Lucifer. Shuddering, Michael screwed shut his eyes, put his face against Lucifer’s unmarred shoulder, the skin warm and terribly bare. Choked, Satan tried to speak once more, but he shivered, and his legs were still so eagerly open and raised — his body itself open, spreading itself thin for him. Him. Not Baal, not a demon. The devil opened wide and warm for the chief prince of Heaven. ‘This is sin.’ Pounding — his heart, on the verge of breaking free, his hands clammy. ‘I need to stop. Father, are you seeing this? God?’ He curled his fingers inside, and Satan cried out once more, sweeter, then whined bitterly. ‘Please forgive me.’ He pumped, slow, glancing down and staring at Lucifer’s body, the tunic still caught on his hips, shielding most of his front groin. ‘Do you throb there too?’ His fingers fucked him, faster, faster. ‘Your hate is a performance. You’re tempting me.’

“Useless. You’re useless.” Lucifer gasped. “Worthless.” ‘Lord, forgive me,’ Michael prayed. The craving was too much — ‘I need to see him *drip* of me.’ Pangs of pain between his legs, in his stomach, like hunger. His mind — spiraling with each twist of Lucifer’s body, his breaths, his grunts. “Michael—” It was softer, and the chief prince

stopped, just for a moment, feeling the inside embrace of Satan, feeling his own stiff pain, and nearly cringing. ‘God, my Lord, save me. I’m not strong enough. You should not have sent me here. God, help me.’ “The table is hurting my back.”

A jerking, sudden halt on their moving, their breathing; and they were both quiet.

Michael will never know why he listened, why he removed his hand, took Lucifer by the waist, held him firm. He drew back and saw his face — tinted at its ends by the hideous monster that lay beneath — and they stared at one another as their feet moved in unison, a few slow steps. Both their faces expressionless, focused, as Satan reached, grazed Michael’s trouble at the front, gripped him through the tunic. ‘If I kissed you, you would taste blood.’ Michael pushed him onto the sofa where he had been, and Satan allowed it, silent at last. ‘I used to blame myself for your silence as an angel. Now I celebrate it.’ He moved on top of him, and Satan pulled up Michael’s tunic, holding it high enough to expose himself. Then, he took him in his hand again, squeezed like he wanted to strangle it of life. Michael grimaced in pain, and he reached for right where his fingers had been buried before.

Satan said, “I was made for you.” They both knew it. ‘You were made for the pierce of my sword, my throat was made for your hands. I was made for you to kill. You were made for me to slaughter.’ “You make me sick.” ‘I still dream of you.’ His lips were parted, asking. For a kiss? For the seed of religion?

The prince breathed harshly, seeing relief on the horizon, closer, closer. He was running toward it; if he ran fast enough, maybe God wouldn’t be able to seize him. ‘Everything hurts.’ He felt prickling in his eyes, and soon he angrily grabbed him again, raising one leg high, began grinding raw against that fated entrance he could never enter, so long as good and evil must be opposed. Again, Satan fought him, kicking, throwing out strikes that Michael took and grunted in pain for — both their performances weak. They were too concerned trying to rasp for breaths, saying, “Fuck you,” and “I hate you,” and “We will all burn because of you,” and “You’re a *dog*.” With every move, the head of Michael’s trouble was threatening to plunge, while his free hand moved to Satan’s chest, planted itself there almost gently but not.

Lucifer's lips parted in a cry, his face flushing pink over brown, his eyes half-lidded, his hair a sprawl like the sun. And the prince inched his hand along his sternum, tracing the top rib toward the bare, long scars on the devil's back, never healed, always open wounds. Michael pressed two fingers through the folds of torn skin, the blood hot still, dribbling at the intruding hand, the same hand that had made these wingless, wet slits. 'Holes.' Another cry, but growling; Satan's anger that Michael met with the rock of his fingers into the wounds, opposite in time to the moving of his hips. And despite the final "Damn you, I will destroy you, I'll eat out your heart," the devil's cries were pitching too high and delicate, clotting over the ears of the dazed prince.

The snake still with them hissed; it sounded like it came from a dream.

Soon, Lucifer was arching his spine, and Michael held him, and he felt the ripple of pleasure possess the devil's beautiful body, as if it was his own. Perhaps it was, was falling limp in the archangel's possessive grip, coming to a wet end between their flesh. Michael's wings tremored out and took his vision with them; he saw nothing as he shuddered so violent he thought he'd been gutted to spill his gory insides. And he did spill — onto Lucifer, messily over that entrance abused by his fingers and hard lust. It dribbled.

Satan whispered, "Coward." Then, he spat at him and that, too, dribbled.

Michael left him, shaking, tugging down on his tunic, twisting and knowing he must tell an angel to heal Lucifer immediately to hide what he'd done. Instead, in the corridor, he saw a bull-horned demon, strong but never to be as strong as him. Baal, his face twisted in confusion. Heart in his ears, pulsing, throbbing as it had seconds before finish, Michael's anger and his fury almost became glee. He moved toward the demon duke, brushed past him. Almost, a wicked laugh escaped; it would have been the cold prince's first laugh in a hundred million years. If Baal found Satan — he might mount him in a rampage of jealous fury. 'Do it. Fuck my seed into Lucifer for me.'

He felt ill in his very stomach, he felt rage, and he felt hysteric pride. Perhaps Baal would destroy Satan for him too. And the thought of saving Lucifer from a fantasy of Baal's anger was miserable, was

hilarious — saving Lucifer now, saving Lucifer when it was far too late. Corpse retrieval on the Lord's orders.

As God had said to him, "Bring the devil home, and all the remaining wicked demons will be left to burn, along with the angels who defiled themselves with the humans. The devil will be made whole again. Lucifer will be resurrected. He will be mine again."

CHAPTER 38



The season of fruit came, soon, fruitless.

Then, Armoni watched his wife eat her brother. From across the room, he saw it occur, seated on the same chair he had been on when he was introduced to the nervous, timid Miriam. He was with one of his giant children, who laid on the ground with its head on his lap. The angel stroked the wet, soft skin, like he would hair, and remained near the horrific sight. Minutes ago, Miriam was barraged with the yelling of her sibling before, bit by bit, raising her head from its usual bow. Without interest, Armoni hadn't been paying attention to their argument — surely, it must've been about food shortages or perhaps on her recent birth — then she had grabbed him, flung him to skid across the ground with beastly strength. Just as he collided with the wall, a flicker of shock passed over her wide eyes.

The angel, too, hesitated, but then quietly urged, “Kill him.” Who else should do it but her?

When the man's shrieks rang out, Armoni remembered, though only adjacently — when that same brother of hers had grabbed him by the arm and pressured him to sleep with his sister. Scratching, almost harshly, at the skin of his child, he tried not to remember the incident in its details, in the horrible wetness, the desecration of his body, the

pulling out of his purity and virtue with it. ‘Angel of nothing now.’ He was remembering, too, the war.

His wife stuck her hands into the chest of her brother, quick enough she had the time to grab his ribcage before his utter death and tear it open with a devastating crack. A splatter of red spat onto her face, some meat pieces flying in tandem; his heart may as well have jumped into her mouth to mash against his teeth. Soon, Armoni felt his child scurry away, rush to his mother, and feast with her.

‘I was somewhat the same, before all this. Sometimes, it feels like I’m the only thing that hasn’t changed since the war. I was stone-faced. I cleaned the house I shared with three rowdy angels, and I chose my clothing carefully, and I washed the dishes. I urged my brothers to remain kind to not disappoint God. They called me angel of virtue. Angel of rules and order.’ Armoni stood, slow, as the dead body was thrashed around, and the woman and the beast ate him from different ends. When they were done, surely nothing would be left. ‘It made me happy to think that then. I wanted to be a perfect angel; I suppose I still do. If I could be a perfect angel without loving God, I would. But I also thought I was so good-looking. I was always hoping someone would call me the angel of beauty.’ Armoni moved away, toward the corridor.

‘When I heard the streets shouting out the name of Lucifer, the angel of beauty, I wasn’t happy.’ He approached the entrance into Cain’s bedroom, tugged aside the curtain, and saw him, eyes shut. ‘I bit my tongue. I didn’t go out and celebrate. Didn’t I also have soft hair and sweet lips?’ ‘Cain. Your children are eating each other.’ ‘I was more beautiful, or at least I thought I was.’

The elder groaned and twisted. “Angel, you’re always waking me.”

“You love my attention.”

“I do.” He chuckled low, put his hands on the mattress, and lifted himself with a groan. It wasn’t often he sat up by himself — he was such a miserable pile of wrinkled, sagging flesh that one might think he was a pool of water on the bed. But, indeed, he had bones, and he was using them to lean back against the headboard.

‘And I thought that the angel of beauty, as they called him, was such a bad angel. I only heard of him, saw him from afar — always, he

was crying and whining. He wanted everything, and he wanted everyone to love him, he wanted even God to adore him. And when I heard — at a gathering, serving some juice for an angel — that God considered Lucifer His favorite, I couldn't make sense of it. Why Lucifer? Why that angel? Is he really more beautiful than the rest of us? I hardly thought so. Still, I don't think so.' Armoni wet his lips, murmured, "Why are you sitting up? Do you want me to get you something?"

"I want to leave." With a grunt, Cain took his legs and dragged them to one side, with great difficulty, planting them on the ground and scooting toward the edge.

'When Lucifer became so vain, languishing his beauty, making everyone in the city stare at his body, his face, wearing sheer, latching onto Michael's arm and murmuring against his throat so immodestly — it sickened me. Of course, I saw them. We all saw them, in their delusion, thinking we didn't see them share a kiss in the middle of the street.' "Leave? Where?" 'I always thought of beauty like a painting, meant to remain still and poised, not ever touched. I despised Lucifer, but I bit my tongue.' "Why do you want to leave, Cain?" 'Angel of bite my tongue.'

Cain chuckled lowly. "You just told me that my descendants are eating one another. I suppose it's time to abandon this city." He smoothed down his linen tunic, then stepped forward, wobbling until he reached the angel, whose arms he fell right into. Azazel grunted as he caught him, but the old man was laughing. "Forgive me, angel. I'm falling on you."

"You can hardly walk." Armoni furrowed his brow, but then sighed softly, gripping the paper-thin arms, the bones that seemed too narrow to hold any muscle at all. "Where shall I take you, man?" He wasn't sure why the ice of his heart was melting, but it tricked down to fill his lungs coolly. "Where shall I take you?"

Cain's smile was hardly visible through the wrinkles, through the white of his beard, through the rotten teeth. "Anywhere. I want to see the Earth." He leaned against him, and Armoni began to step, to walk with him. When they approached the entryway, Armoni managed to reach for a shawl nearby, tugging it over so that he could drape it over

the shoulders of the man, wrap him up in it, then return one hand to his waist and the other to his arm. He walked with Cain, out, out and into the corridor, where they could hear the wet masticating of mother and child on a body. "Help me walk."

"I'm already," the angel replied, quieter, so that he could listen to the eating, nearly afraid to interrupt, "helping you." They took some steps, and Armoni gripped the old man tighter. Together, they made their way down, turning another direction, away from the area where he'd been before, and ahead, to the right, there was another room. "Let me grab my youngest." His other child. "You can wait here, against the wall." Already, he was allowing Cain to lean on a mural before he stepped in, hurried to the center of the room where a makeshift crib, though it was more of a cage of flat stone, held a bubbling, bundled monster, not much of a giant. Armoni reached, took it in his arms, watching each eye blink, every mouth part into a wide yawn.

Behind him, Cain called, "What are you doing — taking the child with you? It'll eat us."

Armoni said nothing, adjusting the bundle of cloth into his arms to fold certain sections across his torso. Soon, he had tied the infant to his front, then returned to the old man at the hall. With one hand, he supported the monster, and with the other, he supported Cain. Tugging them along, Armoni finally answered. "I fear I won't be returning, and I wouldn't want to leave my wife with one more giant she doesn't want to take care of. It's my responsibility. I came to Earth, I left my Heaven, and now I suffer the punishment." They were approaching an exit, and there was smoke in the distance — perhaps, the crops were burning.

"The devil used to tell me about Heaven." Cain chuckled. "Is it true that it's beautiful? He made it seem as if nothing made any sense."

"What do you mean by that?" Armoni blinked at the sight before them both: indeed, the crops were burning, but so were some of buildings — though most in Cain's city were made of stone, many had wooden adornments, some wooden roofs. And the grass was ignited, as well as all the flowers that lined the pathways and all the tall, olive trees. The sky was an odd orange, but if it had rained fire, they must've missed it. Perhaps that was why the man had been yelling at Armoni's

wife, blaming her for it the way he blamed her for all else. ‘Men are all the same.’ He thought of Azazel, then heard a wail that turned over his head. Loud, a young girl in jewels was screaming into the belly of her grandfather, who held her, who touched her hair. She was hungry, she was saying, she was going to die, everything hurt. She was thirsty.

“It hurts,” said Cain, “to see my city like this.”

“I suppose all the crops are ruined.” There was a dry, trickling stench lingering, the burn of wheat elsewhere.

Cain replied, “There will be nothing to eat. This must’ve been an attack by angels.” He knew the demons didn’t attack his people.

Nearby, a giant was perched on a stone platform, chewing on bones, cracking them in its mouths. At its feet, humans clawed at the end of the stage, begging for the monster to save them from whatever had attacked. Soon enough, Armoni saw it: an angel and a demon, the latter pouncing onto the top of a nearby building, stalking, looking down at the giant. The angel, meanwhile, was in the air, holding a sword, striking his wings to hover like bobbing along the surface of water.

When the humans saw them, they said, “Kill them, giant! Kill them!” They were praying. “Protect us!” And the monster rose to its hind legs and opened its mouth wide — “Save us all!” — then it barreled at the demon first, whereas the angel preoccupied itself with a Watcher who had been hurrying toward the stage. With hardly a second of hesitation, the flying angel dived toward the Watcher.

But Armoni looked up to Cain, tugged at him, then the two continued on their way, paying no mind to the brawl of giant, angel, and demon, or the human casualties that might get slaughtered between them. Instead, they headed for the walls on the outskirts, passing by what remained of the huts that Enoch’s people had built and stayed in. Glancing back, he caught some of his wife’s other brothers, but they were running, heading toward the center of the city, where chaos was erupting. “Where will we go, Cain?” Armoni sighed soft, sweet. “Don’t you feel guilty abandoning your people?”

“They’ve long abandoned me,” Cain grunted as he abruptly wobbled in place; they stopped so that he could adjust a thin ankle. “But yes — I do feel guilty. I felt guilty where I was too. My people are

starving, and my sons ensured there was always a plate of food for me. I don't need to eat anyway. Only God can kill me."

Together, they made their way out of the city, heading nowhere.

"You've said that several times. Why do you think only God can kill you?"

They walked past some bodies, some animals ruptured and half-eaten, and some severed trees, some corpses thrown into lakes to contaminate the water. They saw some humans in the distance; they saw one giant eating a stranger; they saw an angel fly high overhead, leading two pairs of various species of birds. Soon, the sky looked less smoked and less orange, but they weren't met with the familiar blue — instead, gray, hefty plump clouds. If the sun were above them, there was hardly a way to know.

"After I murdered my brother, I heard the voice of the Lord call out to me." Armoni wanted to tell Cain that the old man had already said this, but he allowed him to repeat himself. "And He said I would wander the Earth for all of my days. He marked me."

"How did He mark you?"

"I ask myself the same question."

At this same moment, Baraqiel was seeing the gray skies and had curiously watched some rodents scurry away, even jogging a little after them, but the animals were quick to hop into burrows, into logs, to hide from his sight. He furrowed his brow, partly worried. Had he seen pairs of different rodents running toward Mount Hermon? Why? Had he imagined it? 'I suppose I'm tired enough for that.' He should return home, to his wife, to staring at Kokabiel from the other side of the room. 'Kokabiel.' Baraqiel touched his lips. 'I should kiss him.' He decided to do it, before bed. Hopefully, his wife wouldn't mind or wouldn't notice, or would choose to say nothing. He stepped away from the patch of foresty, moving along, heading down the dirt path, his steps partly sluggish.

In his head, he could still hear the wails of a grandfather who had lost his wife and niece in a raid by humans, along with a pot of grain. Baraqiel had asked the man for a description, and the man had snarled that it looked to be Enoch's people with their furs and spears. 'No,'

Baraqiel had thought then and now, ‘why would there be a raid from Samyaza’s men? It doesn’t make any sense.’

And yet, as Baraqiel approached his home, he noticed some dim glows leaking out from the partly-curtained windows and through the cracks in a wooden doorway. Too, there were too many voices, muffled laughter, chattering. At this, Baraqiel began to walk faster, frowning, confused. He reached the doorway and pulled it open, stepped inside quickly, almost stumbled. Stumbled down a step, into a man, into a table of plain wood that had been cushioned by a single cloth where Kokabiel was. Kokabiel, surrounded by three men and one woman, his wife — giggling, raising his legs higher, allowing the man, at the end of the table, fucking him to drive in harsher. With one hand, Kokabiel was working another stranger’s cock, whereas the third man was stroking himself over Kokabiel’s grin.

For a moment, Baraqiel could do no more than stop, his heart, his breath.

When his wife made a disgruntled noise, Kokabiel turned his head, his hair out of its usual braids, saw the other angel, then hacked out a laugh. “Baraqiel! There you are! Come join.” The angel did not move, his feet rooted, his body frozen. “Come here. The stars—” He, abruptly, shivered and squeezed the man he had in his hand, then rasped, “The stars are saying it’s not enough. Not the woman, not the men. Come. I need you in my mouth. Fill my mouth now.” The order made something in Baraqiel’s heart sting devastatingly, and he was already shaking his head, his face twitching. “Baraqiel—”

“No, Koka.” Baraqiel was now stumbling backward, all the air in his lungs gone, stolen.

“Baraqiel, what are you doing? Give me your seed. Give it to me. The stars—” One of the men took some of his wild red hair and started stabbing his cock against the side of Kokabiel’s mouth, trying to slide in. “The stars—”

Once, Kokabiel had laid with him in Heaven, his head on Baraqiel’s lap as they sat in the half-resorted ruins of an old observatory; he had held Baraqiel’s hand; he had told Baraqiel about the stars, that the stars had led them to each other.

Baraqiel, so hurt, so pained in his own throat, felt his hands curl into angry fists before he hurried to run back out of the house.

For a few days, Armoni and Cain continued to walk, stopping for the man to rest occasionally and for him to urinate into his hands, then drink it, just to keep himself hydrated enough. Armoni was never much of a sleeper; he found himself staring up at the skies, holding his child, wondering what the purpose of all this was. ‘You knew, God. You always know. And yet you allow it all to happen.’ He had known Cain would kill Abel; He had known all these humans would die. He knew how every human would die. “All humans are killed by God,” Armoni murmured, turning to Cain, wanting to tell him this, but the old man was sprawled by some wilting flowers, and Armoni realized it had been some time since it rained. “God.” The elderly man’s chest was rising and falling with long, deep snores. “Everything is killed by God.”

The next morning, they reached some of Danel’s traveling people. They watched them from afar as some men came to wage war. Running, raising the new metal on their weapons, the attackers knocked down the old, the sick, and those too slow to run. A group of men killed a husband, then dragged his screaming wife into the tent, and Armoni reasoned, “They must be killing her,” as Cain shook his head gravely. They walked a little more, still hiding. What came to the rescue, here such as in the city of Cain, was a giant. It was Danel’s child, galloping, throwing itself at some of the humans, taking two into its mouth in an instant. But the Watcher was close behind, trembling in the air, calling out and still asking for forgiveness from the God that was not replying to him. When the brother of his dead wife was swarmed, however — the sniffling Danel had no choice but to take a weapon, no choice but to war.

Armoni and Cain began to walk once again. “I’ve never seen,” said the man, “humans acting like this.” During their travel, too, they saw humans burning humans, tying them down, and cutting them open to eat. They saw them lifted, then thrown into the mouths of the giants. “How has this happened? Who taught them this?”

Armoni swallowed. “Who is to say? Satan? Michael?” He took a deep breath, holding his child closer. “I don’t know; I’ve been locked in the same room as you for so long. I’ve done nothing. I’ve only had

things happen to me.” They were nearing a sea now, the sand, and if they stared at the horizon, they could see some stream of light that wasn’t gray, the heart of the sun dim but present, sinking into the waves. “We should rest here.” He helped Cain down, hearing his garbled grunt. “And, tomorrow, we can return to wandering.”

“After I was—” Cain coughed. “After I killed my brother. My parents cast me out with one of my sisters. My father thought a man without a woman wasn’t a man. I didn’t feel like a man. I never loved her, and she never loved me.” He shut his eyes, then he leaned until his back was over the ground and his calloused feet were being lapped by the suds of the sea, growing darker as the sky above shadowed. It was far too cloudy — if the moon was rising, they couldn’t see it, wouldn’t see it. “Let me tell you — I thought of leaving her and returning to the demons, but I hated myself for what I’d done. I feared facing Satan again. Sometimes, I spotted the eyes of a demon watching me, and I wondered if it was Baal. Baal used to watch me whenever I was with Adam. I think he wanted to ensure that man didn’t hurt me too much, but I think Adam knew he was there, and I think that only made Adam hate me more.”

Armoni listened to his child hiss, babble, and he stared at the water. The giants had seemed indestructible until now, but Armoni was wondering if they could drown. They could eat anything, it seemed, but could they survive all the water of the Earth rushing their mouths? He tapped his finger against its body, thought of throwing the baby into the sea just to see what might happen.

“I did return to my family, occasionally, but I only watched them from afar. I saw God gave my mother a child like Abel, and she named him Seth; they were identical. Sometimes, I considered meeting him, just so I could apologize for killing his past body. But I never did. And let me also say — when Adam began hacking one day, he was already thousands of years old, but Eve was horrified. She tended to him, crying all the time, neglecting the children. One day, she traveled with Seth all the way back to Eden. She wanted to beg the Lord for Adam’s life. But all she saw was a closed gate and an angel there with a flaming sword.”

“Michael,” Armoni reasoned.

“She threw herself at her feet. My poor mother. She begged the angel to save Adam. She didn’t want to die. She didn’t want Adam to die. But the angel only stared at her. And when Adam finally died — Eve did as well. She laid at the side of his old corpse, as if she wanted to crawl back into him. She didn’t eat until death, didn’t speak another word.”

Armoni found himself staring upward, at a faint brightness among the clouds, a light that may have been shining down from Heaven; it had an odd shape — like a chariot, like wheels, like a man moving so quick that all his flesh might seep off. It was a blur, even for an angel’s eyes, but it was a recognizable fire, igniting every part of whatever creature it was on that chariot, becoming a chariot. ‘I remember when we angels rode chariots, spurred along by fire.’ And the man was becoming the fire the same as he was becoming the chariot. His flesh turned flame, veins turned bright, eyelashes turned lightning. His face began to trickle, becoming more — like a drizzle might become a pond. When wings sprouted on the creature, Armoni felt a name leave his lips in a horrified whisper — “Enoch?”

The transfiguring Enoch above, then the voice of God Himself: “I am going to bring floodwaters on the Earth to destroy all life under the heavens, every creature that has the breath of life in it. Everything on Earth will perish.”

And Samyaza, standing at Mount Hermon, cried — for he’d witnessed this too.

CHAPTER 39



Azazel, in bed and groggy, took his husband's hand, then kissed it. He played with his fingers, picked at some strings of skin by his nails that seemed excess and could be removed, saying nothing, sighing softly, then seeing the face of his husband, near to him with his eyes open. "Eitan." He clutched his hand tight, and only then remembered how angry with each other they'd been. It was easy to forget; Eitan didn't look angry now, and he seemed tired. Azazel was tired too. "Eitan," he called again softly, "I found Naamah by the forest this morning. There were flies all around, and there was blood; I thought Naamah was dead, so I ran over, and I," 'shouting and grabbing them, pulling this stunted child's body to me,' "saw that it was just hunger." He raised his husband's knuckles to his mouth now, pressing soft, thinking of the end, coming so soon. "I left Naamah with your grandmother."

Samyaza was screaming, doubled over the ground at the peak of Mount Hermon, the same place where he had gathered all the Watchers once, telling them he was interested in marriage, had loved a woman, fallen for a woman. Love as fall, love as damnation, love as death. 'Oh, God, if you could feel even a hint of my fury. If you knew — I'm sure that you don't. Or else you would stop it all now.' At his side, Samyaza's eldest daughter grabbed his arm, dropped her head to

his shoulder, and without thinking — Samyaza reached back for her, wrapping one arm around her waist. “I’m sorry.” His other children were coming toward his other side, the three humans, and the two giants looming nearby. “God has damned me for what I’ve done. This is my fault; this is all my fault.” His children didn’t speak, though his oldest nuzzled her nose against his shoulder; she wore the bone necklace of her mother. Before them all, there was a plain mound where Samyaza had buried her.

Azazel listened to the deep rumble of his man’s voice: “Come. We want to attack another tribe this morning. There are no tigers left in the woods. The giants must’ve eaten them all.” Solemnly, grunting, he lifted himself to sit beside the angel, skinner than he’d ever been, appearing more like bones than flesh, his eyes sinking into the canyons of his head. ‘Don’t disappear into yourself,’ Azazel thought, ‘or I’ll have to crawl in after you.’ And the angel shut his eyes sadly. “I heard from a man that Michael might be in the west. We even told that useless Samyaza.”

Azazel was frowning. “Can we go on a walk together first?” He thought of how Samyaza had said he never hated him — but he wasn’t sure he believed that — then murmured, “Maybe an invasion at this hour isn’t a good idea, and the hunters need to continue adding metal to their weapons.” The angel felt the man’s hand drag along the tunic over his back, the cloth ruffling some feathers, and Azazel could only allow a nervous sigh to seep out of his mouth. “I’m sorry for what I said when I yelled at you all that time ago. I don’t regret loving you.” Did he mean that? An angel shouldn’t lie, but how couldn’t he lie when the truth was out of his reach? He no longer knew himself, no longer recognized himself in the angel he saw in every reflection. “The world might end soon.” He had survived the end once; he would survive it again. “So I don’t want to fight anymore.”

The man stared at him, some flicker of emotion passing over his eyes that Azazel couldn’t untangle enough to make sense of.

“I said I would be with you until death, and we’re married, so I can never leave you.” He hesitated, then whispered, “Do you believe me? The world will end.” It had already been ending, but it felt too slow on Earth. ‘When did this war begin? When did the starving begin? I don’t

remember now. In Heaven, war was one moment, but here it moves slowly, slowly.’

Slowly, Eitan rose from the bedding, murmuring, “I feel like I’ve woken up.” His hand drifted to Azazel’s upper arm, and he began tugging on him to stand. “Come, then, let’s get dressed.” He said, “We should help the men dig a grave for the few we lost recently.” Lost in the war they’d waged against Danel’s people. Azazel hadn’t stopped them. He supposed a part of him had hoped revenge on Danel would grant him a little relief, but it hadn’t.

How had any angel in Heaven taken pleasure in punishing the sinners? Maybe there was none of God in Azazel; ‘I have no desire to punish or even to love now.’ He wanted to curl up in Eitan’s bed like a bird would in a nest, and he wanted the skies to lighten, and he wanted the nature to sing him to sleep again. Earth was not as green, or as wondrous, as it had been when he arrived, was it? ‘And I am responsible. It wasn’t enough for me to ruin myself but to ruin this Earth and this man.’ He kissed him — angel laying his lips on man — but it was chaste now, the wonder of human love dead in Azazel’s mouth.

The leader of the Watchers clenched his teeth and only then heard the sniffles of his children, the youngest toddler beginning to heave in the arms of his sister. “No— Don’t—” With his free hand, he tugged his other children closer, shaking. “Don’t do as I do. Don’t cry.” But they did, their faces reddening, hiccups beginning to burst, and even the oldest giant — Ohya — made a gurgled choke, bringing its arms to its head, fingers digging in. “Don’t cry—” ‘Hypocrite. That’s what I am. Angel of hypocrisy.’ He felt all of his face contort in the mixture of anger, sadness, eating what may have remained of a heart in his chest. ‘God has cast me out for hypocrisy.’

“Enough of this,” Samyaza swore, “all this hiding and healing has done nothing. What have I wasted all this time crying and begging for?” His shoulders were so tensed that his wings were arched within his body. “God is the one who deserved to be cast down from His Throne. I will bring Him down myself, or I’ll be destroyed forever trying.” He was promising it: “I’ll be stronger than the devil; I’ll be stronger than God. I won’t allow God to lay a finger on any of you.” Long ago, Idith had run into the fire, telling Samyaza to let go of her to

do it; the wildness in her face, the sacrifice, the love so great it could have been her death. "I won't let Him destroy your home." He looked at his children. "I'll kill Him."

"I never," said Eitan as they dressed, "told you about my old lover."

Azazel smiled nervously, pulling on too many layers. "No, you've hardly told me a thing about him." He, also, draped on a simple bone necklace made by the humans, then went to his husband's side, taking his hand.

"He was weak; he was born with a gap in the roof of his mouth and a half-formed top lip; they called him ugly; they said he would die alone." Azazel blinked at this, curiously, his eyes falling to his man's beard, which had grown unruly and was beginning to hang. "But I loved him. He had so many problems, but I was patient, too patient at times."

Samyaza began leading his children home, the humans and giants following like ducklings to a mother duck. As he did so, he caught the ends of his unevenly cut hair swinging at the ends of his vision, jagged and ugly, and he was breathing harsh to try and calm from what he'd seen of Enoch and heard of God. When they reached the settlement again, he brought all his children to the hut, then he sat with his oldest daughter and taught her, patiently, how to braid her hair using his short strands. "Part it into three rivers, pull the right one over the middle, the left one now. Like that. Yes. You're doing it well." He said the words he wished his Father had told him. "I'm very proud of you." And though his voice shook, her smile made him surer of his decision than all else. 'God will never love me again.' He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. 'But I won't miss His love. I won't miss Him.' It was a lie, but he had been lying to himself for so long, had been a sinner all along. 'I'll learn to believe it.'

Eitan tugged Azazel's hand, leading him out of their hut. "I wish I noticed when he became sicker. I was too concerned with myself. I wish I had seen how he lost his mind. I allowed his body to rot with a dead soul in him."

Azazel frowned, replying, "Eitan, it wasn't your fault." The man didn't reply; and they could hear misery all around them — crying, wailing, shouting. "Maybe there was nothing you could have done."

The village stunk of death, and the angel turned to see a pile of corpses, flies around them, set up against a home, with some few living humans beside a shallow hole bored into the ground.

“Angel,” the man said, so kindly after months without kindness that the angel might have melted, and they both stopped, near the mass grave, beneath the midst of gray, swollen clouds. “It doesn’t help to remind me that I’m at God’s mercy. You Watchers came teaching us about having will, but will to what? To suffer for His love or suffer in His hate? And us humans are already dead, we’re born hated.” He pulled him closer, pressed his forehead to one of Azazel’s temples, while the angel stared at the steel on the shovels that the gravediggers used, thinking that maybe his iron-working hadn’t only made war, maybe he had not only brought war.

“Eitan,” Azazel whispered, seeing already how a flood would fill the grave. “I’m sorry. I never should have come. None of this should have happened. I’m sorry God allowed this.” The man said nothing, and the angel suddenly didn’t know who he spoke to — the man he’d married or the beast that man had become. “Should we help with the grave digging?” Azazel was fighting a clog in his throat of misery, of wanting to return, of wanting to be a piece of the stars, of the time before ever being born. “Or do you want to go with the hunters, after all? I can help. I’ll be more helpful this time.”

“We should return home.” Eitan’s hand rose to the back of Azazel’s throat and took a gentle, caressing hold, rubbing his thumb on the angel’s artery. Then, he kissed him, slower and deeper than before, but their lips still embraced imperfectly. Their arms came around each other, then Azazel’s wings, stretching, hugging them both. The wings God had given him, the body God had thrust upon him — all these stark reminders that he was created by the same God that would destroy all that ever lived in the burn of a flood. The beast of a God, jealous and full of wrath, and yet — ‘Maybe there is some mercy in God, after all — if He allowed me to have you, for however short.’

And now the leader of the Watchers adorned himself with a human spear, the end made of sharpened stone, and his wife’s name on his lips as prayer. With his two giants like dogs behind him, he ran toward three nearby Watchers, telling them to bring their monster children

and fight with him, before lifting himself to the sky with a beat of his wings. Samyaza took a breath and called out to any other angels who listened: “We couldn’t return to paradise after the fall of Satan. We can’t clean our bodies of sin. We can’t be forgiven, not before the eyes of God. But we can fight. We can fight for every life left.”

As he shouted this, Azazel and Eitan were heading back, and the once-forgiven angel raised his chin and saw Samyaza yelling with some amusement. Satan had done something like this once, hadn’t he? Still, he turned back with Eitan, who was staring up in confusion as well. Whatever it was that the leader of the Watchers had now decided to do, Azazel was sure it was too late; still, he would perhaps join him later. He was too concerned with his husband at the moment, and he knew now what Samyaza didn’t — humans didn’t war like angels did. They lived it much longer, died in it. ‘But let Samyaza have his moment of bravery.’ It was a sincere thought. ‘I hope he’s finally given up on God. Thank you, Idith, for changing him when I couldn’t.’

Samyaza did continue, dropping onto the ground and looking among both his Watchers and two dozen humans who stared at him curiously. “God will not come down to us. He is a coward, but we can drive out His angels as much as we can. We will not lose.” He saw their fright. “For my wife, for my children, for the hospitality you humans offered to us Watchers once. We will protect you.” He nodded his head, then turned over to see two more Watchers had approached, one landing from the sky as he had done. “If we lose this war, all the world will suffer.”

Azazel stepped into his home with Eitan, who had begun grunting, who was groaning and touching his abdomen. “Stay here. I will bring you food.” He guided him to the bed where they had been. “I won’t be long. I might be able to catch a bird in the sky. Oh, and there are a few grains in Enoch’s home. I remember seeing them. I’ll go for those.” The man murmured that he was sorry, removing Azazel’s silk waistband with his dagger, then holding it limply. “No, don’t be sorry. You need to eat. I’ll be back. Rest while I’m gone. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you, angel. I love you.”

For the third time, they kissed.

With Watchers and giants behind him, Samyaza led the way west-

ward to a settlement where the angel Turiel ruled — the angels flying overhead as their monster children ran across the land below, galloping like beasts, so fast they must've taken this from the divine part of their blood. Upon arrival, they stumbled upon fires, as expected, and humans in chaos with a bull-horned demon right in the midst of beating Turiel in the air, taking his head, then slamming him into the wood of a building, pulling him back, then bringing his face forward again. Not long after — *clink, clink, clink* — Michael and his golden chain rose from the smoke between two burning buildings, turning his head slowly until he faced Samyaza.

Azazel pulled on the cape of his husband before leaving; he did it just in case it began to rain. Of course, he knew about the threat of flood, but he was sure it wouldn't come all at once. Stepping outside, he smiled weakly at a starving neighbor and the grandmother of his husband, both of whom greeted him wordlessly. Then, he made his way toward Enoch's abandoned hut. Where was Enoch? Had he truly gone to Heaven? 'What are the angels doing with him?' Were they treating him like an angel or like God? For many, it would be their first encounter with a human. 'Did Enoch really leave all his people to die?' The angel frowned, and he remembered how he had heard this news in the first place — Noah. He hardly knew that man; he seemed so unimportant, and yet Dina had appeared and spoken in God's voice to him. 'Dina.'

Coming upon the open entrance, stepping inside, Azazel wondered, 'Dina, I hope you're well. I know it's not in your heart to say those words that you did. If God is behind you, I hope He hasn't hurt you.' He stepped toward a table, placed his hand on it. There were some scattered things over the wood, as well as scurrying roaches. Behind the hut, there was a great howl in pain, then the heavy steps of a beast; perhaps, one of the giants was making a meal of someone. Azazel would have done something, but he heard a Watcher shout; additionally, his eyes were locked on the wall where he had seen a bag of grain. It was missing now, dragged out — evidenced by some grains scattered along a trail on the ground. Had it been taken secretly? By who?

Samyaza yelled the second Michael attempted to grapple him, but he didn't freeze like he had done during their first fight. Nearly, he

managed to evade by pulling in his wings, falling rapidly, then blooming them out again to beat himself in another direction. The archangel wound back his golden chain, allowed it to wrap around his gauntlet, and though Samyaza couldn't see Michael's eyes through his helmet, he could feel the ice of his stare. Too, he caught the furious twitch at his mouth. But Samyaza fiddled with the spear in his other hand, thinking to merely hold Michael off while his Watchers evacuated humans.

Azazel sighed, stepping back out, rubbing an eye. 'What do I do now?' He would have to hunt for something to eat, kill it with his flimsy hand. He craned his neck, saw the forest of Mount Hermon, then unfurled his wings and made his way over there instead, feeling his cloak ride up his back, nearly tangle with his inner feathers.

Samyaza knew distance was a disadvantage with his spear, but he was sure that anywhere closer to the angel of God was far more dangerous. 'What do I do now?' He narrowed his eyes, then decided the defensive wouldn't work. 'And I'm too angry to just react to his attacks. I need to scratch at him, I need to tear him to strips. You won the war for Heaven, Michael. I won't let you win the war for Earth.'

With the screams of a woman below echoing in his ears, Samyaza surged forward, driving his weapon, but now it was Michael's turn to evade, and he did it with elegance. He flew backward easily, his obscured expression unchanging. The Watcher felt his brow furrow, and he stabbed the air with his spear, nearly poking Michael's front, when another angel flew in from his left, grappled him, tackled him through a rush of air. But when Samyaza felt the rocks slam him, his shout was in more anger than pain, and he threw out his elbow, kicked the helmet off the angel.

"Phanuel—" left Samyaza's gasping mouth.

Phanuel looked down at him, his feathery hair over his face, and he parted his lips, his eyes sad for a flickering. He mouthed that he was sorry, but Samyaza didn't quite believe in forgiveness anymore. And Phanuel punched him across the face, hard enough Samyaza felt blood dart out of his mouth, his head twisting.

Azazel had just found a nest of bird eggs, high on the same branch he was crouched on, with a hefty sigh in relief, when he caught sharp,

sawing sounds. He looked between some leaves, immediately watching a nearby tree creak, then give, falling down and against another tree, before rolling onto the ground proper with a deafening *thud*. At its side was a man with an axe, old but not elderly quite yet; perhaps, he was only 900 years old. He panted, tiredly, but said nothing. Azazel recognized him only after the man turned and left to speak with someone, a silver and feathered thing — an angel with an axe of his own.

“Noah—” Azazel whispered in horror. ‘The ark.’ God had instructed him to build an ark. The angel felt his heart shiver, then he took the eggs and scampered along the branch. He flew, he ran, for home.

Samyaza, meanwhile, threw Phanuel off himself and staggered up and away from him. He coughed, spewing out more blood, feeling a throbbing in his left eye that was making him squint it. Michael landed at Phanuel’s other side, and the two angels stared at Samyaza, who glowered so much he was sure all his blood was turning into steam. “Beasts — the both of you. God has turned you both into monsters!”

Michael gripped the sword hilt at his shoulder, taking a step toward them, but Phanuel put a hand on Michael’s arm. Stopping him, telling him not to hurt Samyaza any more than necessary.

It was no use — Samyaza cried out as a sharp blade suddenly pierced through his back and protruded through his front chest. The dots of blood in his mouth became a sea of iron that he gurgled on, drowned on. By his ear, Baal was laughing. With some taunt that Samyaza barely heard in the agony that poured out from between his lips in a scream, he was kicked off the blade, thrown to the ground, only to turn and see Baal raise the foot that stomped onto his head immediately after.

But Azazel, far away, was now hurrying into his hut, nearly tumbling on a loose pebble, tucking in his wings at once. “Eitan—” He made it past the doorway. “I saw the man Noah building an ark! It’s true! There will be a flood! I couldn’t bear to say it, but God will bring a flood onto the Earth. He’ll kill every human, every giant, every animal. I—” He stared, all the air in his mouth trickling away, all his blood rushing cold and out of him, his heart falling from his chest. “Eitan.” He was dropping the eggs, then stumbling again, moving

forward. "Eitan—" He collapsed onto knees that jerked in the pain of the bare dirt, but he moved into a quick crawl. "No. Eitan. Man— My man. No. No, my husband. No."

Azazel's dagger was still in the man's hand.

"Eitan!" And blood was still pouring out of his wrists, though he was slumped against the wall, on the ground, with eyes so barren and open that the soul must've left them long ago. All the angel could do was scream and face the sky, face God. He pulled the man to his chest, his wings jerking out instantly to shadow them. Each agonized wail was like a sharp cutting within, but the bleeding on his clothing, Eitan's own cloak, belonged to the man. 'My man.' The rasps and tears were ripping themselves from him, too, burning as they forced their way out, shaking his entire body. 'My dead man.'

The angel didn't leave his side; for days, he would not. He laid with him, every minute an eternity, every memory infinite. The promise of marriage until death between them. 'If only an angel could die, if only, if only.' If only God had mercy.

CHAPTER 40



One morning, it began to rain. And the devil said, “I won’t return to Heaven.”

Michael felt all his muscles seize, and he gripped tighter his sword’s hilt with both hands, one foot on the shoulder of the corpse he’d just skewered; easily, he kicked them off, then flicked his wrists so that the excess blood might fall and drip, intermingle with the waters of the coming flood. All about them — there were a hundred dead in the open field. It had been some humans, those descended from Cain, and a pair of giants, though the giants had abandoned the fight the moment Michael had arrived. “You won’t return to Heaven,” the prince echoed. He reached over his head, sliding the sword into its sheath. “It was never a choice.”

“Then allow me to turn it into a bargain; you will be my messenger.”

Beyond the drizzle, tapping away onto his golden helmet, seeping through his clothes, there was already so much wrong, Michael felt. The world was much quieter, as if all the animals and insects had scattered at the first word of ruin to come, and, perhaps worse, the devil was at Michael’s side. Satan hardly ever left his caves and demon children, but he’d stepped out with the soldiers today, witnessed war from the sidelines, moving only occasionally to kill a man or two

himself. ‘For all your strength, you’re more interested in tempting than doing.’ Michael inched over to settle against the cold bark of a tree, staring at the carnage and a few angels and demons, further down the slight slope of the land, which Michael began to realize was a meadow. “I won’t,” he replied, not looking at Lucifer, “bargain with God.”

Satan gave him the order, regardless: “You’ll tell God that I won’t return to Heaven so long as I have the will to rebel.” Michael didn’t dare face him. “I will stay on this Earth until the end of time. Your Lord gave it to me the day that He cast me from His paradise.” Then, Lucifer stepped before him, forcing the chief prince to look upon him and his face, the memory of an angel. Eyes narrowed, mouth turned scowl — “Do you hear me? The Earth is my paradise now, even if God has abandoned His man on it. Even if I know that God will one day bring about the end of time here.” At this, Michael felt his head tilt puzzlingly. “When that day comes, I will be defenseless.”

“What is your bargain?” The angel’s brow was furrowed. “What do you want from God?”

“I don’t believe,” said Satan, “that the souls of the dead are really gone.” He took another step, the drizzle forming beads in his hair, and Michael felt his heart jump and lodge at his throat, his gaze darting away because now all the angels and demons could see them talking. ‘What are you doing? You have no shame. I’ve wanted to cut out my own heart because of what we did in Heaven, and you don’t care. You will never care.’ “If God cannot be killed, then nothing can be killed. We’re all a piece of God, aren’t we?”

Michael bit his tongue, bit harder and harder; he would bleed, soon.

“The part of God within me, within you, too — what shall we call it? This breath of God; you see, Gabriel told me God breathed life into me. Soul, is it? That’s soul?” The ends of his plump, perfect lips twitched. “I can feel the souls of the dead lingering here on every leaf and stone, but I’m certain God will take them all back one day. And He’ll pick out the brightest to eat, savor them in His mouth, then swallow them down into His belly. The soul He once cut out from a tendon will find a new home in His stomach.”

At Michael's disgusted grimace — "Every word from your mouth is filth," — the devil laughed.

"Let me finish, angel." Satan stepped away, and Michael saw the distant Mount Hermon over his shoulder, where a few angels were helping build an ark. "When the end times come, I'll return to God without a fight. I'll even praise Him and worship Him like His most perfect, beautiful angel. All I ask for in return is His worst souls, the grimmest, darkest. In the deepest core of the Earth — among the lakes of eternal fire — I'll torture them until the last of their darkness has bled off. Then, I'll deliver them to Him in Heaven to devour."

"Why?" was the immediate word of the prince.

Lucifer smiled blithely — eyes a golden mirage. "It will be like a second death, an eternal punishment for sin." The rains were growing stronger, and a demon nearby, coming closer — Baal — called out for the devil to ask if they should all retreat into their caves. "My creation. My sin." 'Why?' "Because you'd like to think my pride makes me foolish, but it doesn't. I'll bargain with God for time and for power — if God would like to blame me for death, after tempting the first man and woman, then He should put me in charge of death. And in return, I will meet Him again at the end of time, an angel again."

"*Why?*" It was nearly a bark. "Why are you choosing to bow for God?" He didn't know why he was raising his voice, why he was shaking somewhere deeper than skin — his soul. "All this rebellion, all your *sin* — it will be all for nothing?" 'All of us and all of this between us for nothing? Fight. You said that you'd never stop fighting. Lucifer. Keep running. Run away from God and from me. Look me in the eyes and spit on me once more and let me never see you again.'

Lucifer, still smiling in the rain — "Be blessed that you will never know why. You, beast. Angel of blood and war. Murderer. Killer." A second of hesitance. "You've become just like me, haven't you?"

With this, the devil turned away from him, heading toward the bull-horned demon that had begun making his way up the hill, who immediately stopped at Lucifer's approach. Baal's hardened expression — softening, sighing, as Satan stepped before him, placed a delicate hand on his bicep. He brought his face to Baal's jaw and pecked like a bird, then nuzzling him until Baal turned his head and caught Lucifer's

lips in a soft kiss. Smiling, Baal trailed his gaze to the chief prince, 'Michael,' behind a cold helmet. 'Return to God now, coward. I'll stay here with mine.'

In another place, Azazel startled, hearing a voice outside, deeply, gutturally familiar. He groaned, curled up on the ground, however much he'd padded it with blankets. Still, he raised his head, sitting up slow, vaguely noticing how his braids were frayed, many curls loose, and his stomach was so empty that his hunger would surely begin to gnaw within soon. 'Perhaps, my grief has turned me human. And I can starve.' Indeed, his hunger felt different, but everything was different, heftier, heavier. The voice now called, "Azazel!" 'No.' Except, Samyaza staggered in, all his hair in disarray — all of him darkened by blood, aged and dry. Even still, he dripped of rain, which was growing harsher each second, was snaking toward Azazel's feet as he remained over the dirt floor.

"Don't come near me," Azazel murmured, not realizing he shivered until the words seeped from him. Quick, he gripped the ends of his cloak and pulled it tighter around him, shielding his 'deformed and sick' body before the leader of the Watchers. "Don't you dare—" Samyaza only moved towards him quicker, taking him by the shoulders, but Azazel kicked him back, making a noise like an animal, like a human. "You— This is your fault!" In his pocket, the dagger that Eitan had killed himself with. "This is all because of you!"

"Azazel, please— They told me what happened. That child said Eitan's family had to tear the body away from you. And they're burning him indoors because of the rain. The rain— Azazel, I have to tell you about the rain. I heard from the skies that there will be a flood. It will kill everything on this Earth—"

Azazel seethed, "I know! I've known longer than you! I heard it weeks ago!" A flicker of emotion passed over Samyaza's face but Azazel couldn't read it — 'Surprise? Pain?' "Look at what you've done, Samyaza. I wish I could die. Every part of me aches. I loved him, Samyaza. I loved him so much that I can never long again — not any man, not a friend, not myself. I will never live again." Now, Samyaza tried to interrupt but just a whisper of Azazel's name, gentle and broken. "Let the Earth grow over my body," 'the roots tangle between

my limbs,' "let it eat me. I want to be," and now his voice was cracking, threatening to shatter, "the ground itself and never feel a thing again." The tears burned their way out from the folds of his eyes, a scorch that fell to his throat, to the deep of his chest, his horrible, swollen gut. "Look at what you did. I never would have come here if it weren't for you."

Samyaza's face was misery, was twitching mouth and eyes squinted in pain. Yet, he reached for Azazel and pulled him closer. He brought the angel to his chest, locked his arms tight around him.

"No," Azazel wailed, not fighting him. "Look at what you've done. We angels are all as good as dead as every little creature on this Earth. You directed the gaze of that monster of a God toward us. What now? What can we ever do now?" He reached, touched the dagger's silver hilt. "We are going to lie here and die because of *you*!" And he gripped it tight, drew it out into the damp air, raised it right before Samyaza's face, but he lingered there.

"Do it," Samyaza urged him, voice still quiet. "For everything I've done. And for all that I never did." Azazel's teeth were grit, bared, and yet his hand remained petrified and trembling. "But, let me only say that all the rage, all the grief, it won't leave you if you hurt me."

"What do you know?" Azazel didn't recognize his voice — so shrill and furious.

"My wife is dead," Samyaza said. "There is sadness in me greater than my body and my soul. But I've directed anger all my life at the wrong places. When I was young and God didn't choose me as an archangel, I blamed my feelings for you. When the devil fell, I blamed you and all the sinners like you." Before Azazel could speak, he insisted, "So *gut* me, if you wish — even God knows I deserve it. But know that it will never make you feel better, it will never be enough, because the source of misery is God. He is the one who is responsible for all of this." Slow, Samyaza raised his hand, touched Azazel's around the dagger. "Hate me but don't allow God to distract you from His violence either."

"God," Azazel whispered, "cannot be hurt." With his other hand, he wiped at his face. "It's all worthless. What good does it do to be angry at God? I can't stab Him to pieces. But you— you I can." 'But it

won't make me feel better.' Azazel knew it no matter his fury. "I don't know what else to do." He dropped his dagger, slumping away from Samyaza's touch a little. "What do I do with all this pain? Where do I place it? If I cannot give it to God, then who do I give it to? If I don't get it out of me, then it will kill me." 'But I want to die, don't I?'

Samyaza took his cheeks, held them. "You don't want to die."

"I do."

"No, you don't." Samyaza's thumb dragged along to catch one of Azazel's tears. "You want this pain in you to die."

"I'm all pain now."

Samyaza didn't reply to that. Instead, he said, "There's war raging outside. There are so many dead already, and if this rain never stops, everything will soon be gone. But not you. I won't let God take you from me, as well. I'll defeat Michael, I'll defeat the devil, and I'll kill God."

Azazel stared, breathing, hearing his sigh shake. "The devil," he whispered, "thought he could kill God." 'He still does.'

"I'll succeed."

Azazel listened to the rain, and he whispered, "Can we do it together?"

"Together." This mutual delusion — like faith.

Samyaza took his friend's arm, guiding him toward the bed. He asked Azazel if he was hungry — he had found some berries and nuts — and Azazel whispered that he was starving, then felt his stomach stir. He laid down and when Samyaza settled beside him, he opened his mouth and allowed the lesser angel of healing to feed him. Samyaza didn't hesitate, his other hand brushing some of Azazel's loose curls. They said hardly a word to each other, after this, though they decided to share a bed that night, listening to the rain, facing away from one another. Azazel didn't want Samyaza to notice anything different about him, after all.

When morning came with some distant bird songs, Samyaza said, "We should join the war. You don't have to fight on the frontlines anymore."

"Give me," hesitating, "some time." Azazel had never been much of a fighter, but he was more worried about his sickness. What else to call

it but a sickness? An invasion. “I have family here. Eitan’s. I should apologize to them.”

“I have my giant children looking after my humans. I can have them look after your family too.”

“I can protect my family.” Azazel shut his eyes, still facing a wall, not wanting to move. *Tap, tap* — the rain continued. “If you could, please find Armoni. And tell him to come see me.” He figured he was the only angel he could explain things to. “I—” He touched his forehead, and he was finally untangling from the sorrow that had him on the ground, waiting on his husband to rise from the dead. “I need some time.”

“I understand. I needed many days too.” Samyaza moved off the bed, and it creaked behind him. “But we don’t have much left, so keep that in mind.” As he headed toward the exit, Azazel looked over his shoulder and he saw Samyaza’s green wings seep out of his back, through some gaps in his clothes. Then, Azazel turned back around, and he breathed, and he told himself to try and remember where he was, what to do. He had no solution; he hardly knew who he was now.

The rain was loud.

But within a few days, it wasn’t halting, and Azazel pulled on some clothes, and he went out, and he visited his family — Eitan’s. He saw them constantly sitting on their beds, their hammocks, avoiding the ground growing wetter and wetter. Immediately, Azazel hurried to Eitan’s grandmother, standing on some slabs as she peeled a fruit someone must’ve scavenged. She looked at him gravely, but then she pulled him closer. “Oh, angel,” she sighed. “Oh, angel.” There were no words of forgiveness. “I’m happy you are with us now. And that we haven’t lost you too.” But maybe Azazel didn’t need forgiveness.

Perhaps, he could still be loved, even if not forgiven. Azazel felt like crying again, but he kissed her cheek. ‘I can be a sinner and loved. I can be unforgiven and loved. I can be more than my sin.’ She kissed his forehead, and “I love you,” seeped from his mouth.

She smiled. “I love you too, sweet angel Azazel.”

Azazel apologized to Naamah as well, but Naamah was quite sick and didn’t reply to him. Instead, the child leaned against him, and when Azazel returned to the hut, he brought Naamah with him. He

fed them a herb that had no nutritional value, but he hoped it would help them sleep and, if nothing else, at least the rain was drinkable. Naamah mostly groaned, but now they were curling up with Azazel in bed each night, how Eitan once had.

More days continued to come, and Azazel ate grass, the wet flowers before the downpour drowned them, and some wood. He ignored the splinters piercing into his tongue and throat, and he scavenged for whatever animals there were left for his family and the village. He thought he was helping the war this way, and he caught sight of Samyaza's children sometimes and smiled at them, however weak. But the rain was still not stopping, and he noticed humans start to ask, "Why is all this rain coming? When will it end? Hunger and this. War and this."

When angels and demons invaded one corner of the settlement, Azazel and another Watcher threw bones in their direction, then ducked as a giant half-ran, half-swam, toward the attackers. Azazel, too, hurried to evacuate some humans, and when a wandering group of starved foreigners swarmed into another corner, the angel hesitated, not knowing whether to receive them, not knowing if kindness could exist in war. He tried to usher some of Enoch's people further into the center and, before he or any other Watcher could make a decision, a group of men had already run for the strangers, raising metal weapons. "Where have they found those angel weapons?!" cried the Watcher at Azazel's side.

But the two angels didn't stop the humans, watched with abject sadness as victims disappeared behind spears and clawing hands. When fires began that night, Azazel held Naamah tight and tried to ignore the roast in the air. He wouldn't deny his family the plates of cooked human that night but doing nothing soothed none of his burrowing guilt. 'I feel too sharp, like a sword, like a tooth.' God had taken a bite of an angel and never released His teeth.

Another few nights. "Our houses are flooding," cried a human. "And all our crops are gone now. All the last ones." And the world was grueling. Samyaza only returned with updates and some urges for Azazel to join the fighting. "I'm fighting here," Azazel argued. "The attacks are happening here too." And Samyaza, standing in the hut

with water up to his shins, sighed, whereas Naamah was in the hammock, staring at the angels blankly. “When we arrived,” Azazel added, “we promised to save them.”

Samyaza nodded, eyes saddened. “I understand. Thank you for protecting the humans. As for what’s happening away from here, Baraquel was badly injured, but we managed to hold off Michael’s angels. Danel has been hesitant, but he’s still fighting alongside us. And about Armoni — I can’t find him. Regardless, I’ve been instructing all the humans to move onto higher ground. Perhaps, you should as well.” Azazel nodded and thanked him for the updates — he appreciated them — and Samyaza squeezed his hand.

Within two days, Azazel made known the order to migrate up the mountain, every single house was drowning, and the people didn’t hesitate to trudge through, grabbing the last of their belongings, their family and friends. The angel hurried to prepare, as well, with Eitan’s relatives and told them that there would be waves of migration to avoid all of Enoch’s people moving in a single mob right into the hands of either Michael or the devil. Selfishly, Azazel would be sending his family first. He was not really an angel anymore, after all, was he? So what good was there in being fair? This was war, like the war in Heaven, and love was dead.

The morning of the first migration was only a sunset away, and on that dawn, Azazel sat with Naamah on a hammock, both of them watching various trinkets floating along the gray rainwater — vases, pots, benches, toys, and occasionally a body bobbing along the surface. Not caring for anything other than comforting, Azazel held Naamah to his front, but the child was empty-eyed. “Naamah. You have to get up now. You’re leaving with the others.”

Naamah breathed quietly. “I don’t want to.”

“You’ll be okay.”

“I won’t.”

“Naamah—”

“But I’ll lead my great-grandmother, my uncles, and my aunts. I know the easy way up. I was the one who found you angels. Do you remember?” Naamah shut their eyes briefly, their head against Azazel’s shoulder. “I’m going to be strong. I’ll lead them.”

"You don't need to be strong, Naamah. Everything will be okay. I promise." Azazel pressed his lips to their forehead, shivering, the water rushing below and the air cool. "I will meet you there. Samyaza will, also. We can take care of you, Samyaza and I, once this is all over."

"I hope it's over soon."

Naamah kissed Azazel's cheek, then slid off into the water that climbed up to their ribs, but they managed to sludge through, and the angel came up behind, taking their hand. Together, they stepped into the outdoors, where there was yelling and sobbing as there had been, and many humans were now sitting uselessly on their roofs. Eitan's family, along with some others, were already moving toward where there had once been a river, cannibalized by the forming sea.

When they reached them, the angel and child shared a last embrace, Azazel raising a single wing to try and shield them from the downpour for however briefly. Azazel, then, smiled painfully at Eitan's grandmother, when she was helped over, half-carried, by the brother of Azazel's dead husband. Her wrinkled hand fell over Azazel's forehead, and she blessed him the way no God could.

The angel hugged her as well, her dying thinness. "I will join you," he promised, "soon. Be safe." At his side, Naamah plucked the dagger from Azazel's waistband and then stared up at him silently. But no more words passed between them, and the child soon joined their family and those other people with them, waving goodbye to the settlement of theirs and their ancestors. Goodbye, goodbye.

"Goodbye," Azazel whispered once there was no hint of them in between the flooded trees of Mount Hermon.

CHAPTER 41



THE last time Cain saw Armoni, the angel had declared, “I’m going to live with the demons.”

And Cain had said, “They are good — the demons. I thought about returning to them, often.” Chewing a bug in his mouth, he’d watched the rain begin to fall with pure mundanity. In the same vein, the old man had listened to Armoni’s explanation of Enoch’s transfiguration in the sky — which, it seemed, no human could see — while cleaning his ear and making a mere disgruntled noise. “But I thought I was a monster that belonged among humans. So, here I remain, alone. Why are going to them now? I don’t imagine they’d like that child with you.”

Armoni had murmured, “I hope to find Azazel, at least, and bring him to the demons as well. I remember there’s a fallen angel who loved Azazel during the war, and I think he could take us both in. I don’t know why the other Watchers are still fighting for the humans.”

Laughing — “Love makes angels, demons, and humans ridiculous. We’re lucky that God can’t love.”

“God loves,” the angel had said, “that’s what makes Him so terrifying.”

Then, Armoni had left him to find the entrance to the demon cave, though not before a short embrace. “Take care of yourself, angel,” Cain

had teased, and Armoni had told him to stay alive so that he share more stories of his life.

After this, Cain allowed himself to wander. He took a section of his tunic and raised it over his head, looking rather ridiculous but caring little. He watched as water began to pool at his feet, then rise to his ankles, and with a grunt, he began to stumble up onto higher ground. Touching the trees, he furrowed his brow. Pounding, pounding — his legs. He breathed out through his nose, then turned his back against a tree and sighed. The rain had now seeped through his clothing, sticking to his skin. He was tired; he had been tired for the last couple thousand years. Cain thought, ‘It all hurts—’

‘It all hurts,’ Azazel also thought, gathering his velvet pouch of paints, Rosier’s gift with Eitan’s gift inside. ‘Eitan.’ He grimaced, trudging along the chilling water that had now reached his stomach. ‘I’m sorry.’ It was raining too much to fly. ‘I’m carrying your soul with me. Please don’t worry. I’m holding you here with me.’ He peered out and saw a Watcher lingering atop a home with one wing over his head to shield himself. “Angel!” Azazel called but soon noticed the Watcher had a beast at its side — a giant who was uncharacteristically still. “Everyone is gone already. The last families left in the evening!”

The Watcher blinked at him, then replied, “I was looking for you!”

Azazel held his pouch of things tighter. “If you’ve come tell me to leave, then I’m doing that already!”

“Then I’ll tell you to hurry!”

“I have a family,” said Azazel, “and they’re on the mountain. I’ll be heading that way!”

“I’ll tell Samyaza to look for you there!”

“That’s good to know. Now, stay safe!”

“You as well.”

‘I have to see him,’ Azazel thought. ‘He promised to kill God with me. Even if it’s after the end of the world.’

‘The end,’ thought the archangel Michael, ‘of the world, after all?’ He could now stand back and watch Cain’s city overrun with water, humans bobbing out of the surface, screaming loud, their animals among them, their cattle and their pets, slabs of their homes rising alongside. A father trying to walk through the ocean, raising his baby

daughter over his head so that she be spared from the tides that were only continuing to rise. And, with them all, there were some giants, wailing the same as humans.

Chorus of screams, cantina of misery.

‘I’ve seen this all before.’ Michael could feel Phanuel at his side, touching him gently like he always did, and he could hear Baal further down the wall they stood on, spitting out some rain. When there was a quiet choking sound, he wasn’t sure who it belonged to, but his gaze flickered over. And it was Phanuel, droplets dribbling from beneath his helmet, like the rain was coming from within him. His wobbling lips parted and a pained noise escaped — the first authentic sound Michael had heard from him since the end of paradise. ‘This is good, isn’t it? Phanuel.’ He could hear Baal shuffling away now, running away now. And Michael was trembling, each scream in his ears ringing hollow and battering his bones. ‘Brother. Friend. It’s true, isn’t it? This is good?’

‘This is good?’ Cain thought when he began to wander again, coughing, spewing out something too thick to be pure saliva but missing that metallic tinge of blood. ‘This is what you wanted, God? Is man all you ever wished?’ He was nearly crawling up Mount Hermon now, and he listened to the trees; he was not divine, the first non-divine thing, but he could speak to plants about as well as a man ever could. As a child, the devil had taught it to him, how to listen to the breaths of daises, the whispers of the ferns. ‘Are you happy, God?’

‘Are you happy, God?’ Azazel’s wings were not enough to shield his head from the breeze battering rain at him from both sides, from between the branches overhead as he slipped between the trees of Mount Hermon. ‘This?’ He stared at a pile of bloated bodies caught between some mud and a tree. ‘Eitan — whatever happened to the other hunters? Is one of them here? Some were so young.’ His stomach lurched, and Azazel put his arm over it, bowing his head and gritting his teeth. ‘I saw young and old in that mount of death.’ He was feeling tears once more. ‘Forgive me.’

‘Forgive me,’ Cain thought, ‘Lucifer.’ He had fallen to his knees, feeling rivers rushing down this slope. ‘I want to be a little boy again, sticking pine cones on my head, practicing my demon growl. I want to be in your arms again, hoping my mother and father would forget me

forever. Now, I'm here. I don't know what's left of the boy you loved. I'm just a grave of a man now.' Before him, he could see a hundred tree stumps. 'What's left of me?'

'What's left of me?' Azazel held himself as he continued, a full sob wrenching out of him. 'Eitan, you took some part of me when you died. I've committed a terrible sin. I shared war with all the men and boys. I was angry. I didn't mean to.' He saw an opening beneath a tall rock ledge, and hurriedly, Azazel staggered toward the shadowed grove with an upward incline of an entrance, which was damp but not flooded yet. 'I will search for my family soon. I will bring them here.' The sudden cut-off of rain was like a strike, and he shuddered coldly, flopped onto the ground, heaving, dripping. 'I will do so much.' His eyelids were heavy; his breathing was scratching his throat, his lungs. 'I will do so much when I wake next. It will all be right again.'

'It will all be right again,' Michael thought, 'after this.' The father was dying, his daughter would fall into the flood soon. There was a cat, somewhere, screeching as it stumbled into the waves. 'I think God will —' Phanuel was still crying at his side. 'I think He will make it all right again.' Michael's jaw was so clenched his skull would soon creak and give. 'After war, there's always good.' Like there had been in Heaven, after the war. It had all been restored, after the devil's fall, hadn't it? Paradise had been restored? It was noon, but 'I can see the stars, and they say nothing to me.'

'I'm frightened,' thought Phanuel, 'that there is no will of God that is kind, and there is no good in anyone.' He turned, and he saw his friend, and he whispered, "We are all damned." 'We are all angels of woe.' "The Lord is drowning us too—" laughing miserably "—in love." 'This is love.' The screams would not stop — the hands reaching to die with one another. "I saw what He did to you, Michael. I never told you." He had snuck into God's Throne in the years after the war and watched. "I'm sorry."

Elsewhere, Cain heard rustling, but he didn't lift his head, remaining slumped over the ground, his breath so harsh now that he thought he'd tear his lungs. Could he live without lungs? He wasn't sure. Even still, he was over the wet ground, groaning, when he heard a call of his name. "Who," he grumbled, "is calling me now?" Grunting,

he raised his face a little, reaching to cling to his soiled clothes. “Who remembers Cain?”

Stepping toward him, hood over his red hair, the demon Ara choked up on his laugh, only then to say, “An old lover does.”

‘When you disappeared,’ Phanuel continued, ‘after the war, and Raphael healed me, I asked where you were and he could not answer, neither could the other angels.’ Michael staggered away from him, whispering an order that Phanuel didn’t hear well enough. ‘And when I couldn’t find you anywhere in Heaven, I searched the skies, but you were not there either. When I thought there was nowhere else to go, I went to the Throne of God.’

Ara hurried to the mouth-parted, wide-eyed Cain, falling to his knees and taking him into his arms. “My man.”

“Your old,” Cain amended miserably, “man.” His hands in Ara’s embroidered clothing were trembling, barely holding themselves together, like strained hem.

“My demon-man,” replied Ara weakly, and Cain could not resist the wet sob that he, too, choked upon.

‘There you were, Michael, before God, captive in the same golden chains you’d used on the devil. The Lord must’ve known that I saw you in His cage of light and fire, but He had no shame. Why would He? The Lord answers to no one.’

Ara kissed him, sweetly, beneath the rain. “They told me not to come find you, but I couldn’t bear it any longer.” He touched Cain’s cheek, claws tickling the hair of his beard. “Come with me. I was a coward for staying away from you. All the Earth is flooding, and I want to listen to the rain with you.” The man could only shut his eyes and wheeze, shivering, with a cough.

‘He did not touch you, but He must’ve blinded you because you called out for Him over and over — like you didn’t know where He was. You were too much flesh for a place like this; your spirit was hardly two extra wings, hardly the arc of your back and scream. I wanted to help, but I was just an angel, and if Lucifer had taught us anything, it was that even an army of angels was defenseless before Him. We are all powerless, weak. You were weak. Michael. My dear friend. When you were young, you thought you were the angel of pain. You couldn’t stop

hurting everyone you touched. You hurt me, but I didn't mind. My friend. I forgave you. I would forgive you for nothing in return. I don't need prayer, I don't even need you to apologize. You were screaming in the chains before God. What were you seeing?"

Cain was slumped against Ara, crying like a child, pulling him with weak, old hands closer and kissing him deeper. The demon's mouth was as wet as the rain but hotter, warmer, cozier than the merciless outside. "Forgive me, my heart. My sweetheart. For everything I ever did."

'Why couldn't God forgive you, Michael? I didn't know, and I never will. You called out for Him, and He never returned your pleas. Was this not worse than damning? You murmured the name of the angel you loved — Lucifer. He's gone now. Your beautiful Lucifer hurt me. I don't know if you know. He tore off my face, and I think if you do know, that you'll want to kill him. You'll think that's what I want. But I can't blame Lucifer without blaming the God that made him, that was hurting you now. You kept crying for Lucifer, apologizing to him. And then speaking to him like he were still here. In the beginning, I thought God was kind not to touch you, as you lay in that cage of light, fire, and stars, but only then I realized that was the punishment — millions of years blind and untouched, half-dreaming. Of a better time, I'm sure.'

'Lucifer,' thought Michael. 'I dreamt of us. You were strong enough to hold the Earth, and I was holding the sky; and at the horizon, our faces met in an eternal kiss.' He was flying through the rain, turned toward Mount Hermon; with the wet pelleting his feathers, he couldn't go far. 'Then, I had nightmares. You, cut open and spilling blood and soul tangled onto your feet. Me, always unable to save you in time.'

'God sometimes spoke to you, Michael. He said that the angel of worship had corrupted his wisdom with his beauty. Lucifer had grown wickedness in his own body, then delivered it to devour all of Heaven's host. But it was the chief prince who had put his pride in Lucifer, filled him with the seed of vanity. If it were not for Michael, then evil would not have made the beautiful angel's body its home. Lucifer died long ago; there is a monster that has taken his place. Because you have

corrupted Lucifer's body, God's favorite temple, his soul rot into that of Satan.'

'Lucifer, you spoke to me, your head framed by light or maybe the yellow of marigolds. When we kissed, it was embarrassingly juvenile. We had the first embarrassing love; Michael and Lucifer. In between the dreams of you, I saw you gutted. My hand snaked to your inner thigh, and you were torn open before me. I kissed you. Then, you were bleeding into my mouth. Someone was killing you, trying to kill you. And I heard God's voice, telling me it had all been a lie. Satan's infernal lie to drag me with him into evil. Into *him*, into evil. If others make love — we make hate. I planted some unknown wickedness of my heart in you; you were a Beast, and I was a Beast Maker. I continued to dream of you — beautiful, then broken. I tried to save you. Then, I was killing you.'

"Cain."

The old man raised his head from Ara's shoulder, and he saw the devil, with some demons behind him, and Baal by his side — all of them between the trees, axed and quiet. "Lucifer—" It left his mouth before he'd realized who it was — the face of warmth in his childhood, the mouth that was often sweetly smiling at him, the voice that had sung him comfort as a restless toddler. "Forgive me—"

'Michael,' Phanuel wanted to say, but the chief prince had left his side, and he was alone in the rain, and he wanted to curl into his body enough to disappear into his own wings. 'I wish I could be God, just to give you the forgiveness that you want to hear.'

'One day, I dreamt that it was me killing you, Lucifer. I realized the hands that tore you apart in every nightmare were my own. I was the one dismembering you, decapitating, disemboweling, amid every pretty memory of you and me. In a meadow, in Eden. I had lost you. I killed you when I let you kiss me.' Michael landed in between some trees, trembling, breaths rasping, chest rising, falling. 'I killed Lucifer, long ago. And God's voice came to me once more, saying it would be my duty to kill the devil, for I had made him.'

But the devil stepped forward, falling to his knees, taking Cain in an embrace as Ara drew back. "My child." And the man pressed closer to Lucifer, arms clutching at his drapery like he had when he was

young. “Cain, my child—” A pain in Lucifer’s voice that Cain had never heard the likes of before — but he nuzzled his shoulder. When Baal moved to them, he kneeled and grappled both Lucifer and Cain. And Cain laughed, cried, happily, in the rain, in the rising water. “My sweet child. You have all of my heart.”

“I know,” Cain managed, smiling tiredly. “I know you do. I love you both.” Baal kissed his thin, aged curls of hair, and Lucifer kissed his cheek.

Clink, clink — Michael was approaching, his chest full of memories, full of vigor once more to kill the monster he had created. How God creates. Once, Lucifer said he wanted to create with him. Sin.

“Come with us,” said Baal, tugging on the elder’s arm. “We can take you out of the rain.” He ignored the devil’s pained grimace. “We can protect you.”

“I’m too old now,” Cain replied, lowly, “for you to be indulging my dreams, Baal.” He reached and tugged Ara a little closer again. And he smiled, weak, at all the watching demons, noticing Asmodeus, noticing even the bundled, sniffling Rosier. “Your caves will flood too.” He shut his eyes, and he was in the arms of those who loved him. “Just hold me now. The water is rising.”

Nearby, Michael stopped, standing between crowded trees, one hand at his sword. He said nothing, seeing Lucifer and his child. The water was rising.

Azazel woke to an infant and water by his feet.

And Cain shut his eyes, holding those he loved tightly. The water rose higher, higher, and then it was everything.

CHAPTER 42



“Naamah,” Samyaza whispered.

There was a great pile of dead at a flooded foot of Mount Hermon, Samyaza saw it as he ran past, so rapidly that he almost mistook the tangled bodies for a simple mount of dirt and rock. But he staggered on his feet for a moment, stumbling back and gripping tight his spear. He turned his head and blinked profusely, trying to see through the mercilessly cold downpour, the same that rushed down the side of the mountain that his feet struggled to remain on. Spitting out some murky rain, he trudged closer, coughing out again, spewing a little more, and then touching the bark of a tree to see what must’ve been a mudslide — there were, after all, boulders among the pile, some limbs protruding from beneath them, bloated as much as the unobscured corpses.

And there was a child there, as the Watcher had thought he’d seen, a silver dagger still in their hand. Naamah and their family, almost lost in the sea of dead. Samyaza found himself choking again, on the rain, but it tasted saltier. When he reached the familiar child, he saw that their braids were undone and that their eyes were still open, and shakily, Samyaza reached for their cold hand and took the knife. “Naamah.” He hadn’t known them as Azazel did, but this was still the first child he’d seen, the first human, the first angel-like soul on Earth. Slow, he

lifted the dagger, and he saw blood on it, but not speckled, instead a dipped crimson. A stabbing.

Samyaza glanced at the other bodies, and then he cried some more, twisting away and hurrying, as he had been, to where Baraqiel's people had been evacuated — a lesser peak of Mount Hermon — but refusing to let this agony turn him hopeless. He could not surrender; he could not. He would avenge Naamah the way he would Idith and even Eitan. Unfurling his wings, he tried to will himself forward, sprinting toward a peak and off into the air. He could not let the grief turn into doom. But he left Naamah's body behind, the child murderer who had killed some of their family, certainly in their sleep as the flood continued to fall. 'A poor child, terrified to drown, terrified to see their family drown. Parentless child. I should have taken you as my own like I did Idith's children. Azazel and I could have done it. Forgive us.'

Upon arrival at a flimsy shelter of logs and leaves, the Watcher stumbled, erratically flapping drenched wings, and saw three of his angels grappling with an armored one whose helmet they tore off. Baraqiel took him by the hair, lifting the victim to his knees as his wrists were tied behind his back. Phanuel — staring at Samyaza warily, his nostrils carrying rivulets of red, not resisting. His eyes were almost glazed over, but they were not, and his mouth was almost open in a cry, but it was not. Instead, lightly parted, like he was offering a mere salutation.

Over the rage of the storm, Samyaza shouted, "Where is Michael?! Speak now or we'll tear your wings off!" One of the Watchers set a sword against his neck.

But Phanuel only blinked up at him. "It's—" Samyaza shouted for him to raise his voice, but Phanuel did not. "It's too late now, brother." He breathed louder than he spoke. "There is nothing you can do."

Samyaza snarled, "Tell us where Michael is."

"I don't know." Phanuel swallowed, and his throat teased the blade. "The last time I saw him was many days ago. We were at the wall outside of Cain's city. Everyone there must be dead already." He hacked when Samyaza kicked his ribs dully, away from both the sword and Baraqiel's hold to slump onto his side over a mud puddle.

"Maybe we'll use you as a hostage then." Samyaza, stiffly, turned to Baraquel. "Where is Kokabiel?"

Baraquel's face twitched. "I'm not certain. He's with his child perhaps." He hesitated, then added, "We haven't spoken — Kokabiel and I. But I think he's still on our side of the war." One of the other Watchers with them called out for Baraquel to elaborate. "It's only that the same can't be said for Danel."

Feeling some anger stir within him, Samyaza replied, "Danel is a coward."

"He," Baraquel continued to explain to the others, "told me he was going to beg Michael's angels for forgiveness. I haven't seen him since."

"He's being tortured," Phanuel murmured.

Samyaza nearly cursed like a human, like a devil, but he managed to snap, "What for? Information?"

"Penance," replied Phanuel.

Baraquel stepped toward Samyaza's side, saying, "Danel will tell the angels where we are. We never should have allowed him to do what he did here on Earth. Or in Heaven." Samyaza twisted his head to him, and he could feel the other Watchers turning over, as well. "We let this happen. We brought the rot of Heaven here, and you— you, Samyaza, you allowed it all. Even when Danel hurt our own housemate, Azazel, you—"

Seizing in a flash of fury, Samyaza shoved Baraquel backward, snarling, "*Don't you dare speak of Azazel.*" Both of them stumbled over the wet, clinging ground. "All I ever wanted was to protect him. How was I supposed to know—" 'I made a horrible, idiotic mistake.' "I thought I was helping—" 'My entire life has been a series of mistakes.'

Baraquel raised his gaze at him, but it was frightened rather than angry. "What's there to fight for now? Our families are dead or dying. If God cast the devil here, then where will He damn us to?" Before Samyaza could reply, one of the Watchers made a strangled noise of shock, and they all whipped their heads over to where Phanuel had been only to find a trail of mud between some trees, where he must've used some bark to tear off his binds, then flown away. Birds were singing, somewhere.

After this, Samyaza searched for his family. They were on much higher ground, had been taken there by a combination of his own efforts and the two giants, who were quite obedient to his orders for once. It must've been because they had plenty of corpses to eat now, but Samyaza hated to consider that. Ohya and Hahyah had grown now to half the size of the trees and were curled over the three human children, shielding them from the rain. As Samyaza approached, the two girls and young boy saw him, then brightened with a little relief. "Hold onto me," he called, taking the oldest by the waist. "And, you, Ohya, help me. I want to look for a cave." 'And, afterward, I'll search for Azazel. I'll find him and bring him to this safe place too. I won't tell him of what happened to his family.'

Regarding Azazel's family — Armoni saw them, too, though he didn't recognize them. He passed by hastily, heading toward the half-flooded burrow where he'd crawled into the demons' dwelling once before. It was much more difficult when he had a monster child gurgling and kicking its centipede legs against his front, but he held the bundle closer with a grumble. Trudging through, he came upon the muraled corridors, though it was less a flood here and more like a shallow pool had settled into the caves. Armoni climbed in further, happy for his head to know dryness again for however long this would last.

When a demon, named Moloch, hurried to grab an ornament he'd forgotten in the demons' exodus, he locked eyes with Armoni from the other end of the hall and stopped. Armoni blinked at him, then pleaded, whispering, "Hide me, bring me wherever you demon go." He scrambled toward him, fisting Moloch's damp robe and feeling water leak between his fingers. Initially, the demon hesitated, but his eyes were soft, and he soon sighed, put an arm around him. Armoni glanced behind himself; 'Azazel.' He prayed his friend would find him — to no one, but he prayed.

If there exists some merciful fate outside of God's will, it showed itself then. As Samyaza searched for a place to leave his children, he found the grotto where Azazel had hidden. He set his children down further than the water was leaking in, then he ran over to the angel in a

dark corner, who was curled up in a thin tunic and using a robe to hold something to his front. “Oh, Azazel, I’m so glad— I found you. I was so worried for you. Are you alright?” His voice trailed, then disappeared as he heard babbling.

The child in Azazel’s arms looked older than a few days, but it was still distinctly an infant. Smiling lithely, it had a healthy roundness, a tiny nose, and eyes like wood. Though the angel had him bundled, the infant was able to free a plump hand, grasping at the air before Samyaza. Then, one small, golden wing unfurled out from its back, then the other. The baby’s giggle felt quite mature, like it knew more than any child should.

Voice exhausted, Azazel said, “It’s mine. I birthed it. While I was sleeping.”

Samyaza stared in grimaced horror. “What? But that’s not possible.”

“I thought that,” Azazel murmured, “us angels never had God’s blessing to multiply. But man does, and so does woman.” He paused. “God punished women uniquely; when Eve ate from that fruit, the Lord cursed her with difficult childbirth.” With the hand that didn’t hold the child, the angel touched the loose curls by its brow. “Man received no punishment on his seed, so perhaps that’s why this one isn’t a beast like your children were with women.”

The very core of Samyaza was unsettled, but he couldn’t deny how the infant angel’s bright face was mellowing his heart, his soul. “Have you named it?”

“No.” Azazel sighed. “I think it can decide its own name.”

Cautiously, Samyaza lowered to sit properly beside him, then touched his arm. “He looks like you.”

“He looks more like Eitan.” Azazel smiled, though much softer. “That makes me happy, though I don’t think he’d be very excited about a child. He liked me as a man. He said it so himself.” He straightened up. “I’m afraid he would have thought of me as less of a man if he knew about this.” Azazel pinched one of its cheeks. “Still, I find myself hoping Eitan’s soul is happy, wherever it might be.” He feared now that it was in God’s hands.

Samyaza swallowed, parting his lips, wanting to speak, but there was a guilt in him that urged him to remain silent. So, he breathed slowly, nodded. "I'll leave my children here. I think they'll be safe with you."

"There is no food here."

"My giants will hunt for any dead body in the water. There is no other choice." The words were so heavy that Samyaza felt his body strain under their weight. "Is it alright if I leave you alone a day?"

"It's not," Azazel teased, and Samyaza raised a brow at him. "Sleep here. Don't leave your family alone for so long. You're fighting for them, aren't you?" The cherubic child started stirring, gurgling, flapping its wings, as Samyaza's human children approached with curious faces. "Don't get lost in war."

"You're so knowledgeable now on war?"

The older angel chuckled, reaching for his velvet pouch of belongings and snaking his hand inside for the paints Eitan had made. "Come closer." Pulling it out, he clicked it open, scooped some of the dark, grounded malachite, then hovered two fingers before Samyaza's gaze. Shutting his right eye, Samyaza tenderly watched his friend with the left, smearing the dye over his closed eyelid. "Now, the other." Samyaza closed both his eyes, welcomed darkness. "Let this motivate you. War paint." Azazel then took some red to drag streaks of color down his face. "You could be the angel of war."

Samyaza opened his eyes, slow, staring at Azazel's face, his lips. "We could be."

"We could be the angel of war?" Azazel laughed, inching away, holding his child tighter. "God started this war. We should be the angel of scapegoat."

Samyaza did, indeed, leave for war. He took some pleasure in it this time. Maybe not all war was bad, or maybe this was no war, maybe this was just a search for justice, but he wasn't the type of angel to mull over semantics. And so — he left the cave to return to the fight, to hunt Phanuel down for his escape and Danel down for his betrayal. Instead, he gathered with the other Watchers to find neither. They attacked some lone demons, some single angels, but Samyaza immediately

noticed that there were fewer living things among them. He no longer saw human men wandering in bands to kill one another, nor did he see any mass attack leveraged against them. Had they lost? Did God believe the Watchers would merely roll over and accept death at the first sight of rain? When they found Kokabiel, he was sitting over some water, no longer laughing like he used to.

That night, Samyaza returned to the cave as promised, met both his human children and his giants, and he slept next to Azazel, though he didn't touch him.

The war continued like this. Samyaza slept just some hours, then left to continue the fight, as Azazel remained where he was. He ventured out only occasionally, scavenging for food, then scavenging for higher ground. The rain continued. When Samyaza returned next, Azazel told him where they should move, and they all climbed up the rivering mountain. They came into a cave that had an uneven floor, that lent itself to some flooded parts and some dry sections. Deeper, on a dry platform, the two angels settled the human children and the cherub baby, who seemed perfectly capable of taking care of itself and seemed far too happy to be alive in this predicament.

"I should," Azazel told Samyaza, "go looking for my family and bring them here, as well." Samyaza whispered that maybe he shouldn't, but Azazel searched anyway, climbing high and low, frustrated and stumbling down mudslides, latching onto tree limbs to try not to forget the way back. He called out Naamah's name as many times as he could, and the name of Eitan's other relatives. And when Samyaza returned to him again, bloody and grunting, Azazel murmured that his family, surely, was on higher ground. "I have faith in them like you wouldn't believe, Samyaza. They are perfectly well. I can feel it."

During this time, Samyaza and Azazel slept closer to the entrance, on an elevated section that was damp but not flooded. Though they were a bit too far from the children, they could keep watch easily from here, could be roused from sleep at any noise. Already, Azazel thought it strange that they hadn't been captured by Michael or his angels yet. Perhaps, they were busy slaughtering the remaining humans or holding giants under the water. Azazel frowned at this all, one night, sitting with his legs over the small ledge. Samyaza was curled up beside him; it

was supposed to be Samyaza's turn to sleep, but he kept readjusting his body. "If," Azazel called, "you're too restless, then sit up. I can try to sleep in your place."

The leader of the Watchers didn't move. "I'm sick of the sound of rain now."

"Heaven was so quiet," Azazel replied. "Angels weren't, but our Heaven was. I miss it." 'Though we will likely never see Heaven ever again.'

A rustling sound, then Samyaza groaned and raised his body, draped in a loose robe, green as the wings that were hidden beneath his olive skin. "Before you sleep — I've been wanting to speak with you."

Azazel turned his head, looked at Samyaza over his shoulder. "If you're going to apologize, I don't care to hear it right now." When Samyaza tilted his head, Azazel snickered, "You have the face of an angel who wants to ask for forgiveness."

"I do want your forgiveness, but I also want to confess."

Realizing this might be a serious conversation, Azazel turned his body in entirety to Samyaza and saw there was some smudged, dried paint on his face, and he resisted the urge to wipe it with his sleeve. "Confess what?"

"I still love my wife," Samyaza began. "I love her very much. Even in death. I'm sure you feel similarly about your husband." Azazel nodded, aching. "But I did love you, long ago. When I didn't know what my feelings were. You took up all of my mind. I would curl up in bed to sleep and find myself thinking about you each time. I'm not sure what causes us angels to love, if it's noticing beauty or enjoying our time together or just finding you the most pleasant soul in a sea of them. It frightened me. When the Lord chose Raphael as his archangel, instead of me, I thought he was punishing me for my love for you." Azazel breathed, shakily, and so did Samyaza. "Then, I hated you, or I told myself to hate you. When the war happened, I tried to hate you even more. But look at me now, still thinking of you, worrying for you. I don't know why we fall in love. I don't know what causes this. Surely, it's not the will of God, and I loved you before the devil. But now love has been my downfall twice. I can't stop falling."

Azazel murmured, "You still love me." 'You're too shy to look at me.' Samyaza didn't reply.

"I love her too."

"You always will, I think." He was thinking of Eitan. "Some loves will never leave you." Azazel inched closer, and Samyaza turned his head, slow, to look at him; their faces were so close that the full moon behind them was cut thin. "Angels are eternal, our loves are eternal." He exhaled through his nose, knowing that if he breathed through his mouth, he would be teasing Samyaza's lips. "That sounds right, doesn't it?"

"It does." Samyaza stared, his eyes sad. "Can I kiss you?"

Azazel decided he wouldn't mind that, not now. "You can kiss me." And he was kissed; the angel before him leaned forward, tapped his lips against his own, and Azazel liked the mold of his mouth against his. An angel's lips were softer than a human's, but Azazel would miss the imperfections, would miss his man. He, still, reached for Samyaza's jaw, let his fingers trace the dried paint. Then, he parted his lips, took Samyaza's bottom one between his teeth, tugging just enough to make a quiet, low noise sound from the back of Samyaza's throat.

"Can I?"

"You don't need to ask." Azazel snaked his tongue into him, and when Samyaza pressed his palm between Azazel's legs, he shuddered but retaliated by putting his hand on Samyaza's chest, shoving him onto his back on the rock, hearing a huff of surprise. Immediately, Azazel clamored onto his lap, though leaning down to kiss him as he rolled his hips, rousing hard heat between them. Dampness. Samyaza reached behind Azazel, tugged the end of his robe up to expose the soft, rounded flesh he could grip with both hands, part like he would a fruit. "Mm." When one of Samyaza's hands moved to probe, Azazel whispered for him to kiss him some more, maybe put his mouth on him first.

Samyaza was happy to oblige, and after another kiss, asked Azazel to climb up, to use his face however he liked. Smiling, sadly still, Azazel moved toward the hot mouth, hot breath, of the other angel, and he reached to fiddle with Samyaza's hair, twirl it, tug at it. "Thank you." Samyaza scraped his teeth on his inner thigh, and Azazel's breath

hitched. "I've been hungry." Azazel shut his eyes, pulled harsher on a braid. "I want my mouth full of you." He flicked his tongue, the angel above feeling his wings twitch out of his body, flap a little helplessly. 'Let me drown in you.' Azazel's cries in pleasure were stifled, but he was shuddering, hips needily rocking, chasing wet warmth.

'Even God can't take this Heaven of you away from me.'

CHAPTER 43



THE same God that loathes you loves you. He abhors you the same way that he adores you — over fire. You are nothing and less than nothing, an insect beneath the rising, cold water, tide at your neck with your face craned up to Him. But we can't all be saved.

Though Samyaza held onto hope, Azazel had learned this lesson long ago, and when the end came, it was on a day that was no different than the others. The leader of the Watchers rose at dawn to see the waters had come up to the ledge where he and Azazel slept, and its waves crashed onto where the children were as well — though the cherub infant remained dry, flapping its wings and sitting atop a giant. It was smiling; how could a baby born to devastation know that life was not supposed to be like this?

'I think,' Azazel found himself thinking, 'the humans were happier when there was no promise of salvation, when there was no promise of riches, when they knew they had nothing.' Perhaps, he was wrong. 'The demons are happier than the angels.' He only vaguely heard Samyaza telling him to search for higher ground, and he nodded, turning over to him and pecking him on the edge of his lips. An imperfect kiss for a moment that couldn't be important, couldn't be, when Samyaza was leaving like he always did, and Azazel began gathering his

few things again. He would have to carry the bones that made up the youngest daughter; she had grown too weak to walk, but still had the strength to nod her head after Azazel had stuck his feet in the water, waded over her, turned his back on Samyaza. He didn't watch him leave. How could he have known?

The end creeps up on you. Harbingers of destruction stalk. Angels.

And, of course, the demons and the angels knew where Azazel hid, had seen Samyaza go to and from this place all this time. Of course they did. The devil knows everything, and God knows even more than that, and there is nothing you can do, sometimes. Fate, or God's will, is locked tight on our ankles. And locked tight was Danel, whom the prince Michael had captured, taken around in his chain, and dragged through the ocean of flood. A gruesome display — Danel crashing against dismembered homes, the occasional bloated body, and some humans still flapping their limbs, attempting to latch on.

Samyaza found the other Watchers gathered, much less now than the confident two hundred who left Heaven together once. Just the desperate remaining now — but not too desperate, not so much so that they'd surrendered to hiding with their spouses, their children, giant or human. On top of a roof that had been the tallest building in Cain's city once, Samyaza landed to see Kokabiel, whose face was, in the simplest terms, bashed in — dipped into itself in an assortment of skull fragments and pink-red muscle.

Baraquel, now, was holding him, head snapping upward when the other Watchers called Samyaza's name. "Samyaza!" All the anger of their last argument was missing, replaced by rabid eyes and visible shivering beneath the rain. "Michael attacked. His angels told us they have Danel and that they're going to bring him to God to destroy forever." Samyaza flinched, and he noticed that his old housemate's tears were among the water dribbling down his face. "Samyaza, can you heal Koka? He was saying something about an ark when Michael attacked —" Baraquel clutched, tighter, the blind, silent, deaf Kokabiel. "My hands are shaking too much. Please heal him."

Samyaza reached over the edge of the ceiling, touching the floodwater. "Let me try." He gripped the waves, but they were quiet, saying nothing to him. "Bring him closer." Baraquel flinched at this, and

another Watcher called out, angrily, that they had no time to waste: Kokabiel could be healed once Danel is returned, and Kokabiel can wait. Baraqiel whispered in horror that Kokabiel must be terrified, but the other Watchers shouted for him to be patient. At this, Samayza allowed his hand to drift away, and he nodded shakily. “Yes. Let us retrieve Danel first. Baraqiel, stay with Kokabiel. We’ll all be back soon. Have faith in us.”

Baraqiel stared, eyes wide — all the fright and anxiety so unbecoming on an angel built this large and strong — but soon, his eyebrows curved, and he nodded. “I’ll wait here. Please go for Danel.” And he continued to hold Kokabiel, tight against his front, smearing it with his blood, his meat. “I’m sorry, Koka,” he pleaded. “I’m so sorry.”

And they all left Baraqiel to his grieving.

Azazel, meanwhile, took his baby and sighed frustratedly as a piece of rock fell at the cave entrance and water rushed down, spilling down onto their feet, spurring the three humans to scream before the two giants grabbed and lifted them from the raging flood. “Come, all of you.” He held his child closer, nodding his head at the entrance. “Follow me. We’ll climb onto higher ground as Samyaza said.” He was starting to wish now that he could leave and see what the state of the war was. Where was Samyaza? Kokabiel? Baraqiel? Maybe, he would join the fight the next morning. ‘No, I can’t leave the children to die from neglect.’ But he was growing restless. ‘I need to do something. I need to grab God and drag Him down. Anything.’

Together, Azazel and the children stepped onto the flood, clamoring, crawling. ‘What to do? What to do?’ Azazel stopped for just a second; he could hear animals, too many coming from one direction. When he turned to his left, he saw it — a wooden peak of something between some trees, something large. ‘Noah,’ he remembered with almost a hysterical, manic laugh, ‘there you are.’

Samyaza and the Watchers couldn’t fly well in the rain, and so they landed on whatever roofs were still upright, but there were not many anymore. When one angel’s wings had soaked too deep, he fell, shouting as he did, plunging into the waters. “Someone go after him!” the leader yelled. “The rest of you — keep flying!” He was screaming to be heard above the winds, the roars of the waves below. “We can’t

linger or we'll fall too!" Distantly, an animal was howling its final cries of pain. "Keep onward!" One Watcher dived to help the fallen one, but the others continued, and it wasn't long after they had made it to Mount Hermon that they saw nearly every single demon and many of Michael's angels. They were scattered among the trees — an army of thousands, whereas the Watchers were hardly more than a hundred and forty.

The bait — Danel — was there as well, wrapped in a golden chain and settled on a tree branch at the center of them all. Holding the other end of the bindings, however, was the devil, seated on another branch above, but he was masked — wood painted red — and crowned — a four-horned amalgamation of thorns and bone. Over him, there was the skin and furs of every animal adorning him. A king, commanding two armies.

Samyaza tried to halt, to hover in the air, but with the wet battering, he had no choice but to continue forward. He reached for the spear held between his wings. 'I can't turn back either. The Watchers were too far from any dry place to land, and they couldn't fly for much longer. "One attack," he called out to the Watchers — it was all they would need to land and take Danel if they could. "And when we can, we'll retreat."

"Samyaza, they'll slaughter us all!" shouted the Watcher Turiel.

"We have no choice but to land," replied Samyaza, and it was true. There was nothing he could do, there was nothing any of them could do.

Azazel was so hasty that he almost left Samyaza's children behind — the giants having difficulty maneuvering through the forest even as it grew less dense, became primarily stumps. "Hurry!" he told the humans and monsters, though not looking to them, instead craning his head upward to stare at the front of the ark tearing into view. At its high bow, an armored, cloaked angel was stationed, turned away and looking upon whoever may have been standing on the deck. Already, the gates to the lowest levels were shut, thick logs that the flood was thrashing against, trying to break through. Desperate, Azazel skidded to a stop on the water, holding even tighter his infant, then looked back to the human children, barely making it out of

forestry into the open air. The youngest boy, in one of the giant's arms, started wailing.

And, in an instant, Azazel twisted to the ark again, saw the angel stationed at its peak turn in a violent jerk.

"Michael," left Azazel's mouth, miserably.

And all was wrong elsewhere too — Samyaza thrashed when Baal lunged out of some trees, swinging a claw, tearing lines open on the Watcher's face, blood falling, mixing with the flood, pinkening. "Surrender," Baal spat, then took Samyaza by the hair, yanking so hard he almost scalped him, then kicked his abdomen hard enough to burst something inside, crackle something else. More blood, spewing out from Samyaza's mouth. "This is already over."

"No," Samyaza gurgled, taking his spear, swinging it, stabbing it into Baal's throat. "You demons are doing the bidding of the angels now! Didn't you fall to fight against God?!"

"I fell for love." Blood seeped out from Baal's bared, sharpened teeth. "I thought you might understand." The tip of the spear stuck through the other side of his throat now, but he was laughing, more redness blubbering out, his face twisting in anger. 'And because of what you've done,' Baal didn't say, 'my child is dead now.' "Pray the Lord finds mercy for you now, fucker."

Like a shadow at sunset, Michael loomed back and disappeared, and Azazel's heart lunged into his throat, into his head, beating, punching tears out of his eyes. But there were children behind him, even the monsters — all relying on him. 'I can't do this anymore.' His mind was whining. 'Let this all end. Let it end.' Regardless, he turned back, saw the giants, and desperately ordered, "*Run.*" He prayed they could hear him over the wind and rain. "*Don't follow me. Get on the ark.*"

The baby was stirring in his arms, but Azazel quickly sprinted himself, hurrying along the right side of the ark and shouting, "Damn you, Michael!" He couldn't see him, but surely the prince would hear him. "And damn Noah!" A teenage boy peeked out over the ledge, looking confused. "Damn Noah's family! You will all suffer a thousand deaths!" An elderly man came up behind the boy, taking his shoulders, staring at Azazel — Noah, his face terrified. "Let the screams of all the

dead follow you for the rest of your life!” Azazel had done this all before, had led an angel away from family before. He had succeeded that time, and he would again.

Clink, clink — Michael, close behind, and Azazel held his baby tighter, twisting, running into the nearest woods, choosing the densest sea of it. The water cried out beneath his feet, each splash accompanied by his terrified breathing. ‘Michael is too heavy in that armor to run after me, and it’s too difficult to fly here. I can lead him far away. The giants can climb and get Samyaza’s children on the ark.’ He bit his lip. ‘Where is my family? Naamah?’

Samyaza screamed as he fought, but Baal’s rage was monstrous, piercing him with his talons, tugging and tearing off his skin in strips. He knocked his horns against the leader of the Watchers, digging the ends into his jaw, and when he took one of his wings — he was slow, deliberate, as he began to tear it off. The shrieks of Samyaza’s pain didn’t stop him, the claws digging into the string that attached feather to flesh, and he snipped like they were strings of a piano.

‘Please be okay.’ Azazel was sniffing now, so scared the trees were blurring. ‘My poor family. And, Samyaza, where are you? Where is everyone? Armoni? Dina?’ He stumbled, but he was heading down a hill, and the falling granted him momentum, led him further away from the clinking sound behind him. From Michael. ‘Where do I go? Where can I run away? From God? From His sword behind me?’

Screaming out his misery, the leader of the Watchers tore himself away, but there was only one wing left on Samyaza. He quickly slid down, grappling Baal’s legs in desperation, watching one of his beloved dark emerald wings fall, splash into the flood below, and he wanted to wail, but he was seething, trembling. “Baal,” he pleaded, “don’t do this. Whatever the angels are offering you, it won’t mean anything. God will damn you all. He’s a beast, even greater than what you realize.”

Baal looked down at him, mouth twisted in a glower. “You talk to me like I’m stupid.” He raised his free leg, planting a foot over Samyaza’s fingers. “It’s because of how stupid *you* are that you Watchers ever came here.” He kicked him, striking Samyaza on his side, flinging him to a branch that the Watcher managed to latch onto a second before he could tumble down. The bark was rough, tearing

open already bleeding hands, and Satan was above, still holding Danel, who Samyaza now saw slumped over in his pain, a dozen sharp silvers poking out through his chest, the tips of swords. "Danel," Samyaza tried to say, "forgive me." 'You never wanted to come to Earth.'

The devil answered, "There's nothing left to fight for, Samyaza."

Before Samyaza could reply, an angel approached, landed on the same branch that the Watcher hung onto. It wasn't an angel he recognized. Just one of many, beautiful and terrifying in all his armor, his great wings outstretched behind him. "Satan," Samyaza still said, "why are you doing this? After what God did to you?" The angel put an iron boot on Samyaza's hands, and the Watcher hissed, but he didn't let go.

Far away, Baraqiel looked at a pair of angels heading toward them, carrying chains of gold. And though he knew Kokabiel couldn't hear him, he said, "I followed you here because you wanted to show me the Earth. I'm happy you did." He squeezed his hand. 'I hope God can bury us together.'

"Why?" Samyaza was snarling up at the devil, no longer fighting his tears, letting them mix into the flood below, with the dead, with the houses, his blood. "Lucifer!" He tried. 'Where is my family? Are they still in that cave?' All the rain was still beating him, chilling his skin and seeping into his many bones, broken enough to peek out from him. "Lucifer, don't do this. Don't let me fall." He hacked, the rain falling from his mouth. 'Azazel. My children. Where are they?' Choking on his tears, he heard the shouts, the splashes of Watchers plunging into the sea. "Take off your mask." He couldn't hold on much longer, his fingers would break. "And look at me!"

Satan didn't do so, but he said, "You will not be damned forever," in a voice that was softer than before. "And if you dream through it, the torment will be easier."

Samyaza stared, blinking water out of his eyes, coughing chillingly once more, as the devil released Danel's chain, then practically slithered to leave the battlefield. "Don't leave me here!" His desperate plea didn't manage to break through his agonized rasping. "Beast! Everything they said about you is true!" 'Azazel. Idith. My children. Azazel's child. My giants. All of my love.' He choked on his sobs. "Don't leave me here!"

The angel raised his boot, delivering just some taste of relief to Samyaza, who looked up to him, all his war paint smeared.

“Don’t hurt my family,” Samyaza cried. “Don’t hurt my family.”

“We are your family,” said the angel, “*brother*.” Then, he slammed his foot onto Samyaza’s fingers, and when Samyaza fell, it was silently. He couldn’t find it in him to scream, his thoughts on his children still, Idith’s oldest daughter killed by Michael, long ago. Everything, everyone, felt like long ago. Raphael inviting him into the river to teach him to heal, saying he foresaw greatness in him. The flood waters grabbed Samyaza now, pulled him deep, as deep as they could, and it was like fire.

Azazel’s foot caught on a fallen branch, and then he fell. He swerved, aiming to land on his shoulder, but that movement sent him spinning, rolling, crashing against the mud and the waters rushing still past him. Down a hill, trying to curl around his baby’s body, crying out with each twig snapping beneath, each rock punching a bruise into him. But when he skid to a stop, the rain stabbing his back, mud on his lips, he kept silent.

Smothering his baby against his clothes, he dared not make a sound, waiting. It was difficult to hear anything now, even his own breathing. His chest was hollow, his body was hollow. Freezing droplets were pouring down his face. ‘Please,’ he begged. ‘No more of this. I’m tired. I’m so tired.’ One of his ankles was pulsing at the joint, aching.

Clink, clink.

He crawled, slugging his body through the rain. “Let the children on the ark.” Azazel gasped, a tide of rain splashing down the side of the mountain, striking his side. “They did nothing wrong. The Earth is full of innocent people. So many people that—” He suffocated on his cry, whining. “People that haven’t even had the chance to live. Humans whose only sin was to be born. God is killing them all. He’s a beast.”

On the ark, another angel cast the giants climbing on with the children down into the budding sea.

“Beast—”

Michael brought his sword down on Azazel’s back, through his body, all the way through, digging it into the ground. Red leaking into the rainwater, pooling, and the angel laying like dead.

“Samyaza has been taken care of,” said the voice of the devil, coming closer. “As have all the Watchers. That one at your feet must be the last one.” A few wet footsteps, then Satan’s sigh right by Michael’s ear. His red mask was missing, but his crown remained. “Azazel. Turn him over.” The prince reached, but he was gentle now, pulling free his sword, tugging Azazel onto his back.

Satan and Michael’s faces contorted into deep horror at the sight of the tiny angel in Azazel’s arms, still and gone.

CHAPTER 44



Our Lord split the sea of the flood, and He had all the Watchers gathered, then bound beneath the Earth. His booming voice commanded the angels to take the single drowned land and pull it apart to create several broken, continental pieces. In between these bodies, there were new mountains and new ravines. The angels who'd corrupted themselves with marriage were dragged even deeper, down into the darkest crevices of the ground's flesh, their ankles chained to the stone walls, their wrists locked in the same fashion. As this was done — the angels of God offered no healing to the Watchers of their injuries or ailments.

The angel Samyaza was left abandoned with a single wing; and the angel Azazel was bound nearest to him against the rock, remaining with a hole in his chest, perhaps left without a heart. Kokabiel, beside Baraqiel, remained with his skull caved into himself. And Danel was left punctured a thousand times and left to bleed for eternity. To eat, they had insects.

Raphael had just seen Gabriel release a dove into the sky, had seen angels paint the lights above in the first Earth rainbow, when he settled to stand over the now-still flood water, stared down at his reflection, his wings outstretched behind him, and felt all his sadness eat away at his soul. His knees would not hold him long, but he hadn't brought his

cane, not interested to walk or stand in any place here. When the sound of his name reached him, Raphael turned his head to see another angel standing upon the flood, the sun by his head and reflecting off the water the same. Everything may as well have had a mirror placed below it; Raphael was seeing double; he was seeing the cloudy sky reflected below his feet.

“Michael.”

He wasn’t dressed in his armor. “You shouldn’t be here. Come with me to Heaven.”

“The Lord will speak to Noah and his family soon.” Raphael’s eyebrows curved in sorrow. “How will they continue like this? Everyone they knew is dead.” Michael’s face was empty, his eyes as reflective as the sea. “Even if the Lord says that He will never destroy all of life again, how could they live on in this grave?” Earth was silent, for the first time since its creation.

“It will all be better,” said Michael, voice tender as meat, “now that man can begin again.”

“Doesn’t it make you wish we angels could begin again, as well?” Raphael grimaced, and he held his own hands, feeling his legs begin to tremble. “If we could all return to the beginning. If we could all make different choices or have different loves, knowing what we do now.” His gaze softened. “If we could only have hindsight.”

“God must have all the hindsight for all of time,” Michael replied, “and He still chose to destroy the world.”

“But we are not God,” Raphael offered, his smile small, his eyes burning. “I could never live on after destroying all of this. Maybe it’s my disposition, my want to heal. I have reared so many angels for God, and I could never hurt them because of it. Maybe I am too weak. Too weak to be a prince.”

“Come, brother. Let’s return to Heaven.”

“I hope that all the Watchers will find some peace where they are. I hope even the devil will find some peace. Do you hope for peace too?”

The devil had led his exodus, traveled down to the center of the Earth, and made a home in its fires, though one might still find demons in caves, in dark places, for all the centuries to come. As promised, the Lord directed the most wicked souls down to the hands of His adver-

sary. And though God left the gates to Heaven unlocked for him, Satan never came home. He, like the first time, would nurse Earth back to health, and he adored his demons, even the cruelest.

“I hope,” said Michael, “for peace. I hope for love again.”

“Let me hold you, brother. I have some love left in me. It’s not much. My heart is broken, and I’ve lost too many children I reared now.” Lucifer. Azazel. Samyaza. “But I have some love left in me.”

In the dark, Samyaza called Azazel’s name, making a noise of agony and dragging his body as close as the chains allowed. Azazel outstretched his hand, calling for him too. By just a finger-width, they could not touch. They whispered that they were sorry, at the same time. They whispered that they forgive, at the same time. I love you — at the same time.

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rafael nicolás is an author of queer fiction. He likes marigolds.

*Standing Figure of a Youth,
Giovanni Battista Tiepolo*

